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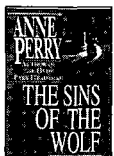
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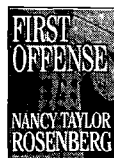
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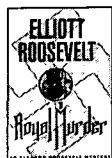
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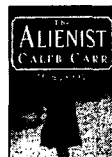
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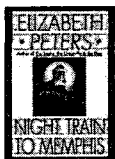
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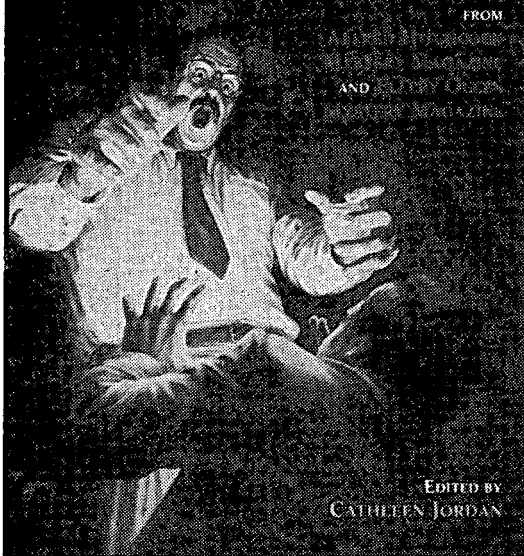


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FICTION

The Death of Junior McFarland

Wanda
Jones



Illustration by Richard Loehle

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Nobody really cared when Junior McFarland died. Well, everybody *cared*, because it was awful (you know what little towns are like). But nobody cared, if you see what I mean.

Junior was one of those "helpful" people that nobody can stand. He'd leap smartly to his feet to give you his seat and knock your iced tea out of your hand. Or he'd insist on carrying your groceries for you, and when you tried to tell him you could manage, he'd rattle you for the sack till it broke, and there'd be oranges and cereal and horehound candy all over Main Street.

Last month he seen me walkin' home from town and whipped his daddy's old Ford over to the curb so sudden I tried to jump Daisy Hartman's picket fence. I scratched both hands, tore my second best pair of stockings, and dropped my library books in the wet grass. He took me home, though. It was hardly worth it to try to say no to Junior.

Junior wasn't a handsome boy, but he wasn't ugly neither. He made fair grades in school and never got into trouble. He was quiet and polite and always trying to help, and he didn't have a friend on earth. When he was younger, he tried asking a couple of the local

girls to go out with him, but they just looked at him and he stopped.

Junior's folks done their best with him, I suppose, and no one ever knowed what they really thought of him because they never said. They never bragged on him, or criticized him, just went their way, minding their business, going to work and church, and so on. Junior's pa owned the hardware store at the south end of Main Street and his ma did good works. They was quiet and decent, and when Junior was twenty-five or so, they died gently and decently, about three months apart. Junior took over the store, and pretty soon it was like the old folks had never been. The only ripple they left was Junior.

Junior was civic-minded. He was so civic-minded that the rest of us was tempted to just give it up altogether and let him have at it. He attended every town meeting, every church picnic, every parade, every community gathering. Junior donated hoes and rakes and brooms to the Ladies' Auxiliary so we could hand them out for door prizes at socials and so on. You could put your posters in his window and your collection jars on his counter. He wasn't only eager to help, he was *anxious*. He went to church every

Sunday and sang in the choir, passed the collection plate for the preacher, and swept out the church when old Henry was too drunk or hung over to do it.

The quarry north of town where they found Junior's body was a dangerous eyesore. It finally got so filthy and polluted even the Barkley boys stopped swimmin' there, but kids still went up there to fool around, you know how kids are. There was poke greens along the old abandoned railroad tracks behind the quarry, and I used to go up there gatherin' from time to time. You could tell from the beer cans (and other things) that the kids still parked there some, but mostly I had it to myself, 'specially since I was only up there in the daytime.

I was on my way home from Nellie Parkhurst's funeral when I heard some kids had found Junior's body floating facedown in the quarry. His store had been closed a couple of days and he hadn't showed up for Nellie's funeral, but folks was so glad to have a rest from him, they'd not questioned that too close. It caused quite a stir when they found him, though, I can tell you, coming on top of Nellie going the way she did.

Nellie was out digging potatoes at the back of her garden last Wednesday and run across

a rattler. And her heart being what it was (and all that extra weight she packed), by the time she had screamed and panted and huffed her way to the house for help, it was as good as over. She lived long enough to tell the neighbors what happened, but her heart give out soon after. And the snake didn't even bite her (I liked that part). The neighbor kids like to of tore her garden to pieces trying to get a look at the snake, but it was gone.

I never liked Nellie. She always acted like she thought she was better than me. 'Course, in a town this size, not likin' somebody don't keep you from goin' to the funeral.

Two weeks ago, Nellie poisoned my old mongrel, Texas Ann, that never hurt a fly. I accused her of it to her face, and she got all red and flustered and screamed, "I never done no such of a thing." I knowed better. She'd already told all over church how the dogs was diggin' up her garden and she was going to put a stop to it. Maybe Texas Ann did dig in her garden a little, but so what? She was all I had.

I'm an old woman, but I get around pretty good so most folks don't remember just how old I am. One of the good things about that is they've forgot

about my childhood (or never knew).

My pa was one of them old-time walkin' preachers. You know, the kind that handles snakes to prove how righteous they are? During the school year I stayed here in town with my grandma, but summers I walked the hills with my pa. Naturally I learned to handle all kinds of snakes, deadly and otherwise. So when I found the rattlers' den up by the quarry, I never bothered it, nor told nobody.

When Texas Ann died, I decided to teach Nellie a lesson. I can't say I intended to kill her, but when she died it didn't bother me none. And when I was up at the quarry, who should come along but Junior. He seen me headin' out with my gunnysack and followed me, thinkin' I was after poke greens.

And you remember what I said before about Junior? How he wouldn't take no for an answer, and just loved to help?

Well, I let him.

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FICTION

PIRATES

John Maddox Roberts

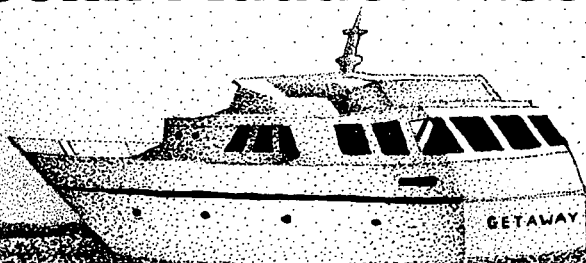


Illustration by Mark Penta

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Mel picked up a leather punch and a mallet, placed the punch against the skin of his forehead one and a half inches above the bridge of his nose, and tapped it with the mallet, biting through the skin until he felt it thunk solidly against bone. It hurt like hell, and was going to hurt worse, but a man had to be willing to endure suffering if he expected to enjoy any real rewards in this life. He took the punch out, and a stream of blood began to run down his nose. He'd expected that and had a towel handy to blot it up. He knew that any laceration to the scalp, of which the forehead was, technically, a part, always bled freely for a while.

He'd hoped that the plug of flesh would come free when he removed the punch, but it remained stubbornly attached to the bone beneath. In preparation for just this difficulty, he'd brought along a little tool he'd found in an artists' supply shop—a plastic stick with a pointed end and a flat, rounded, spatulate end. With his eyes fixed on his reflection in the mirror, he carefully inserted the spatulate end into his circular cut and began to push the plug inward, levering it up from the bone, careful not to damage the edges of the neat, circular incision. Everything depended on that

hole's being nice and round and exactly the right size.

He'd found the punch in a Tandy catalogue. The page with the punches on it had a row of circles along the bottom to show the exact size of hole each punch would make. Mel had taken a nine millimeter bullet and found the circle that was exactly the same size as its base, point three five seven inches in diameter. Detail work like that was important if he was going to pull this off.

It took longer than he'd expected to get the flesh plug loose. He decided that scalping must have been a harder job for those Indians than the movies made it look. When it was free, he carried the punch, the mallet, and the scraper over to the porthole and tossed them out into the water. Then he flipped the little cylinder of skin out to feed some lucky fish.

He put a gauze pad over the hole and tied it down with a strip of cloth to stop the bleeding. He had to move fast now because pretty soon the edges of the wound would swell up and that wouldn't look right. He took Nathan's .45 from his belt and laid it on the chart table next to the X-Acto knife and the opened can of calf's brains. Jeff's nine millimeter was still tucked in the back of his pants. The Ingersolls would

have seen the two of them carrying those guns when they were taken aft and locked up. He wasn't sure a New York surgeon and his socialite wife would know the difference, but it would help. Every little detail they remembered would make their story more believable. Details were important.

He stepped over Jeff's body and out of the cabin. Out on deck he made a quick scan of the sky and the horizon. The sun was almost down. The mainland was visible a couple of miles to starboard, not too far for a strong swimmer like Mel, even carrying a satchel. No other craft on the water, and no planes or choppers near enough to see anything, just a couple of contrails way high up. Nathan's body lay just where he'd left it, facedown with the back of the skull smashed in. The wrench he'd done it with lay on the bright wood of the deck next to the body, decorated at one end with blood and hair. Mel checked his bandage to make sure it wasn't leaking. A trail of blood along the deck just wouldn't look right. All was secure, and he went aft.

The yacht was laboring, settling deeper in the water from where he'd drilled a few holes in the hull. It was a sickening feeling for any real sailor, and Mel always hated doing it to a

fine little craft like the *Get-away*, but it was necessary and, besides, when this was over, he could buy his own yacht instead of having to work on other people's boats. Mostly they were people who couldn't handle a dinghy on a lake, it was just they had the money to buy anything they wanted and hire pros like Mel to run it for them. People like the Ingersolls.

As he fished the key out of his pocket he went into his Amos Botts character. Amos was an amiable halfwit from Biloxi, a first-rate sailor who would work for less than minimum wage. A long time ago, Mel and Jeff and Nathan had discovered that selling yourself cheap was the easiest way to get onto rich people's boats. The more money they had, the more they tried to do things on the cheap. So Nathan played Jacques, an illegal Haitian immigrant, and Jeff was Buck, a navy deserter. They hung around the docks all over the islands, working the boats that sailed out of the classy marinas, establishing solid reputations as men who were dependable, never caused trouble, were properly respectful, and, best of all, worked cheap.

That was another thing they'd learned about rich people: they talked to each other,

passed tips around at their fancy cocktail parties. The crew were expected to be waiters when the parties were held on the yachts, and Mel had kept his ears open to hear what those people talked about. Most of the time the subject was money: how to get more of it, how to protect what you had, how to keep from giving other people more of it than you absolutely had to.

In his mind, he could just hear them talking about him and Jeff and Nathan—Yessir, you hire those three boys and they'll work their butts off for you, keep your boat in top shape, never give you any lip, and they won't try to rob you blind, either. Take their pay in cash, no government paper to bother with—nudge, wink—can't afford to demand union scale, if you take my meaning, eh? No papers, no Social Security, hell, no I.D. Just twice the work for half the money.

Mel had the key out and paused by the door, working to get the properly breathless sound into his voice, going over the words he had so carefully planned.

The way they usually did these things, Mel and Jeff and Nathan would spot a promising boat, a big one, fully provisioned for a long voyage, the

kind that the owners just took out to travel around for the whole season with no sailing plan. The kind no one would go looking for until after the end of the season. They'd hire on at some little port where they weren't known, it was never a problem. Yacht crews were migratory, always coming and going. Owners never asked questions, as long as they thought they were saving money.

Then, late some night out in deep water, they'd roust the owners out of bed, knock them on the head, weight them down, and sink them to feed the fish. They'd change the boat's name and registration numbers, maybe give it a new paint job, and take it to one of the islands where the dope runners paid top dollar for a long-range boat that was fully provisioned. That way they could make two or three runs without having to put in anywhere for supplies. With profits that big, they could afford to scuttle the boat after its last run. It was just another boat that'd disappeared with all aboard. Happened all the time. Maybe people would think they'd strayed into the Bermuda Triangle or something.

They didn't do it too often, maybe two or three times a season. Yacht owners always traveled with plenty of cash and

other valuables, but the three never tried to move personal items that might be traced. Those went down with the bodies. Mel always told the others that safety and detailed planning were the most important things. They always cleared enough to keep them in style for the rest of the year, until the next season.

This time, though, Mel had changed the plan. Now it was big score time. He'd told Jeff and Nathan that they were going to deliver the Ingersolls to a dealer who was going to hold them for ransom, then sink them when the money got delivered. The other two went along without any argument because Mel had always been their planner. Mel had stayed forward at the helm like he didn't know what was going on while Jeff and Nathan roused the Ingersolls. They'd been sunning on the aft deck, Dr. Ingersoll with his pitcher of martinis, Mrs. Ingersoll on her belly in her little bitty bikini with the top unfastened so she wouldn't have a white stripe when she wore one of her low-backed cocktail dresses. When the two men showed up with guns, she'd sat up and squealed and held up her top like it was something important.

He tapped lightly on the cabin door and pitched his voice

in an urgent whisper. "Dr. Ingersoll? Miz Ingersoll? It's Amos. You all right?" They were handcuffed to a stanchion in there.

"Amos?" It was Dr. Ingersoll. "What's happening?"

"Dr. Ingersoll, I kilt one of 'em and got his gun, mashed him on the head with a wrench. Th'other's forrard in the main cabin. I think I can get the drop on 'im."

"Amos," Dr. Ingersoll said, slowly and clearly, like you'd talk to a child, "you be careful. Don't do anything stupid."

"Peter!" Mrs. Ingersoll hissed, sounding right at the end of her tether. "We're trapped here! What if he's killed?"

"The one I got had the keys. I'm gonna toss 'em in through the porthole. Can you reach 'em if they land on the cot?"

"Yes, I can," Dr. Ingersoll said. "You do that, Amos. And you be careful. Don't do anything stupid." Like he really had to say it twice. Mel had to fight down a laugh, the way Dr. Ingersoll was trying to sound so calm and in control.

Mel went to the side and leaned over and tossed the keys in through the opened porthole. "There. I'm goin' forrard now. Don't you do nothin' till I come for you, y'hear?"

He went on back to the main cabin. This next part had to be done fast, but with great precision. He couldn't afford to get even one detail wrong. He took the bandage from his forehead and checked himself in the mirror. It looked good, the blood just seeping now, the edges of the wound not yet swollen or discolored. The slowly welling blood kept the bone from showing. He tossed the bandage into the water, then took a dampened cloth and wiped the drying blood from his face. That wouldn't look right. Had to be just a little fresh blood running from the hole. The cloth went into the water.

Mel picked up the X-Acto knife and made half a dozen cuts high on the back of his head, bearing down so that the point of the blade scraped bone. It didn't hurt as much as the one in front. Instantly he felt warm blood flowing down the back of his neck to soak his collar. Those scalp wounds sure bled a lot. Well, blood was just what he needed now. He tossed the X-Acto knife out the port-hole. It made a tiny splash.

Now he took the nine millimeter from the back of his belt and picked up the .45 with his left hand. He leaned close to Jeff's body, and with the bigger gun he fired once, making a hole right through the stab

wound just beneath Jeff's sternum. A split second later, he fired the nine millimeter into the bulkhead at a spot just above eye level. To the two in the cabin aft, the distance-muffled shots would have sounded almost simultaneous. He placed the nine millimeter into Jeff's hand, then laid the .45 back on the chart table.

Mel stepped over to the bulkhead, turned around, and pressed the back of his head against the bullet hole. Then he squatted, dragging his blood-matted hair against the polished wood of the bulkhead until he was lying on the deck. He stood up and studied the long streak of blood down the bulkhead from bullet hole to deck. It looked okay so far. He reached back and got some blood on his fingertips and flipped them a few inches from the bullet hole so there would be a better splatter effect around it.

Next he picked up the can and took some bits of calf's brain out of it. These he stuck around the bullet hole, the congealing blood holding them in place nicely. He pulled a few hairs loose and stuck them there, too, then stepped back to critique the job. It looked perfect. The can went out the port-hole. More fish food. He picked up the .45 and lay back down

on the deck, resting his head at the bottom of the long streak of blood, letting his body go limp and sort of awkward, the way dead people's bodies looked.

He lay there for several minutes, just relaxing after all his careful preparation and hard work. The Ingersolls would be coming back pretty soon, after hearing the two shots and not hearing anything from faithful, friendly, good-natured dummy Amos. Everything depended on the hole in his forehead's looking realistic enough to fool a doctor. Then the Ingersolls would report him killed along with the other two. The authorities would never question a New York surgeon's word about a thing like that. He wouldn't check for a pulse or pupil dilation, not with a bullet hole right between the eyes and brains splattered on the bulkhead. Not with all the new worries he'd have when he came into the cabin.

Actually, that was going to be the hardest part; not laughing when Dr. Ingersoll saw the safe.

It had been one of those things you could pick up hustling cocktails at a deck party and keeping your ears open. People could be awful indiscreet when it was just a halfwit crew boy standing around. It turned out that, every voyage

in the *Getaway*, Dr. Ingersoll would put in at Grand Cayman to make a deposit, just a little money-laundering for himself and a few of his doctor friends. Not really big money, not like the mob, but tidy sums, more than Mel and his friends could hope to make in a dozen good seasons. That was when the plan had come to him.

From outside he heard a gasping, shuddering intake of breath. That was Mrs. Ingersoll, catching sight of Nathan's body. Dr. Ingersoll made shushing sounds. They came tippy-toeing toward the cabin, afraid of what they might find but not having the nerve to wait any longer. Besides, by now they knew the boat was going down. He had his eyes closed, but the light coming through his lids dimmed when they stood in the doorway. There came that gasp again.

"My god, Peter! They killed each other!" He heard her bare feet pad quickly to the rail, then retching noises. Steps came close to him, and he could feel the doctor leaning close.

"Oh, Jesus!" All that calm and cool control was gone. Mel thought it was really a shame he couldn't open his eyes to see the look on Mr. Ingersoll's face when he saw that the door of the flimsy safe was pried open and the thick stacks of bills

were gone. He was going to have some tall explaining to do when he got back home to New York.

"Peter?" It was Mrs. Ingersoll, back again. Her voice was weak at first, but it got stronger real fast. "Peter, the boat is *sinking*! We have to get away now!"

"They opened the safe. Where'd they put the—where are our things?"

"Did you think they wouldn't open the safe? It was just traveler's checks and credit cards, and my jewels are insured. We don't have time to look for them. We have to get into the life raft now." So she didn't know about the money scheme. Then, sort of wistfully: "Poor Amos. He died trying to help us."

"He was trying to save his own ass, too, dear. It's unfortunate that he bungled it, but you know he wasn't very bright." He was getting his confidence back. Mel could practically hear him making up his story: the hijack, the shooting, the narrow escape from the sinking boat. Sorry, fellas, but your dough is fish food. Hell, I lost, too. The insurance is barely going to cover the cost of a new yacht. That was okay with Mel. The fewer hard feelings, the fewer questions there were, the better he liked it.

"Peter, can we send out a distress call?"

He shuffled around for a minute. "It looks like the ship-to-shore's been disabled. All the power's down anyway. We're in sight of land, we'll be okay. Go on and start getting the raft loose. I'll be with you in a minute."

"Peter, it's almost dark! There are sharks out there!" She really wasn't taking this well, and Mel couldn't blame her for that. It hadn't been a pleasant day for a lady like Mrs. Ingersoll, used to the easy life the way she was.

"Sharks don't attack people in rafts, dear," Dr. Ingersoll said, being all cool and calm and in control again. "Just go on. I have to look for some things here. We'll be just fine."

"Well, hurry! I want to get off this boat *now*!"

As soon as she was gone, Dr. Ingersoll started rummaging through the cabin, frantic to find where they'd hidden the money. He opened everything, that would open and turned over everything that would turn over, including Jeff's body. He even partly rolled Mel, and for a second Mel worried that the doctor would notice something wrong about the wound on the back of his head, but he wasn't interested in Mel and saw there was nothing under

him but polished wood. Pretty soon the water was lapping in over the sill and Mrs. Ingersoll was hollering for her husband to get out there and help her before it was too late.

Dr. Ingersoll went out and Mel kept still while they scuffled around on deck, getting the life raft loose, their feet splashing in water for the last couple of minutes. Mel heard a bigger splash and their voices while they tried to get into the raft without turning it over, then the sound of the little paddles working frantically as they tried to put distance between themselves and the sinking yacht.

Mel opened his eyes and saw that it was almost completely dark. He just lay there for a while, letting the warm water lap around him. The water was deeper at his heels because the boat was settling stern first. He'd drilled the first holes back near the engines. After about fifteen minutes he sat up, the back of his head parting stickily from the angle where the bulkhead and the deck met, the congealed blood already dissolving in the swirling water.

He got to his feet and waded to the open doorway. Outside he could see stars now. Somewhere he could hear the voices of the Ingersolls. By now they'd discovered that there was no

signal light or distress beacon on their raft. That was no big problem. There were lights visible on shore. They could get there in three or four hours. The exercise would do them good. Or else, if they were too flabby to paddle the whole way, they'd be picked up as soon as it was light. That'd be even better, give Mel that much more time to get away.

The main deck was completely awash, and he climbed on top of the cabin. From there he looked over the sinking boat and saw that Nathan's body was gone, floated off somewhere. Even while he thought this he saw Jeff's body come floating out of the cabin. No doubt about it, this was going to be a night for the fish to remember. They probably hadn't eaten this well for a long time.

He went to the big coil of rope he'd laid on top of the cabin and heaved it over. Beneath it was the backpack, and he picked it up, liking the heft of it. Inside the pack, stashed in multiple Ziploc bags, were fat bundles of hundreds, all of them nice used bills, the sort suitable for laundering. He hadn't had time to count them, but it had to be more than he and Nathan and Jeff had made in all their jobs put together. Well, now Amos Botts was officially dead along with the hijackers, and Mel

would go somewhere else and have his own boat. The scar on his forehead would look a little funny, but he'd make up a good story about how he got it. Nobody cared much what you looked like if you had money.

He put his arms through the pack's straps and shouldered it, settling the weight on his back and fastening the straps across his chest with a plastic tie cord so the pack couldn't slip off if the water got rough. He stood there for a moment, the *Get-away* almost all the way under now, wondering if he'd forgotten anything. Too late now if he had. He jumped.

When he hit the water, the buoyancy of the pack made it ride up and scrape the back of his lacerated scalp painfully. It hurt, but he didn't yell. The Ingersolls might be close enough to hear. After a second to get his bearings he started to stroke for shore. He'd be there long before the Ingersolls reached land or got picked up. There was a highway no more than a quarter mile inland, and he'd just be another backpacker, hitchhiking from somewhere to somewhere else.

After a short while he stopped and looked around when a wave lifted him. He saw the lights of shore, no problem there. He didn't want to chance passing too close to the raft and

maybe being seen. He licked his lips and tasted blood along with the salt water. Between getting wet and the exertion warming him up, the hole in his forehead was bleeding again.

Behind him he heard a thrashing noise. First it was just one or two splashes, then they came closer together until the water back there sounded like a regular washing machine. This definitely wasn't good. He started swimming again, trying to get farther away from the boat. But that wasn't good either. Every move he made started the blood flowing faster. Now why hadn't he thought of that? A couple of compresses, tight bandages and a rubber bathing cap; that probably would have taken care of it. That and getting rid of his shirt. It was bloody, too.

Mel thought about what he'd been doing the last hour or so. First the little plug of flesh from his forehead he'd flipped into the water, that would've attracted something, some little fish to come in and snap it up. Then the can of calf's brains. That would have brought in more. There'd have been some fighting over that. Bigger fish, too. Then there were the bloodsoaked clothes he'd tossed out, cleaning up after himself to make every-

thing look perfect. Better than a dinner bell to the right kind of fish.

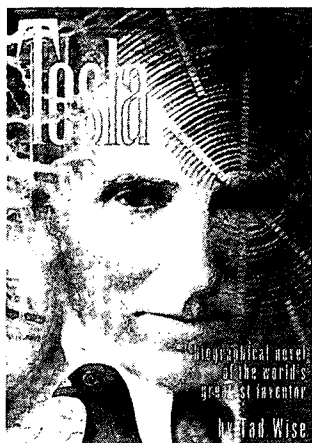
Then there were the bodies floating out there now, Jeff and Nathan with those open wounds. That was what they were fighting over back there. He should've thought to fasten them down somehow, so they'd have gone down with the boat, not attracted so much attention.

The water had seemed warm at first, but not now. He wondered where the Ingersolls were. Probably not far away. He'd be safe on the raft. But he couldn't see it, and he hadn't left them a signal light. He began to swim harder, not caring how much noise he made. A few minutes later the first big fin

cut in front of him. He tried to get rid of the pack so he could swim faster, but the plastic tie was the kind you had to cut once it was fastened.

The shore lights weren't too far away, but he saw another fin cut between him and the lights, then three or four more. They were cruising fast, searching for whatever it was that smelled so good. The thrashing back there had stopped, but dinner hadn't satisfied them. They were looking for more.

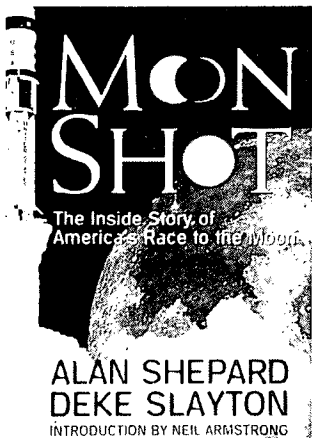
Something rough brushed against his side and the big fish whipped around and came for him. Details, Mel thought. It was always overlooking the details that messed you up, just like he'd told Jeff and Nathan a hundred times.



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FICTION

INSPECTOR TIERCE AND THE CHRISTMAS VISITS

Jeffry Scott

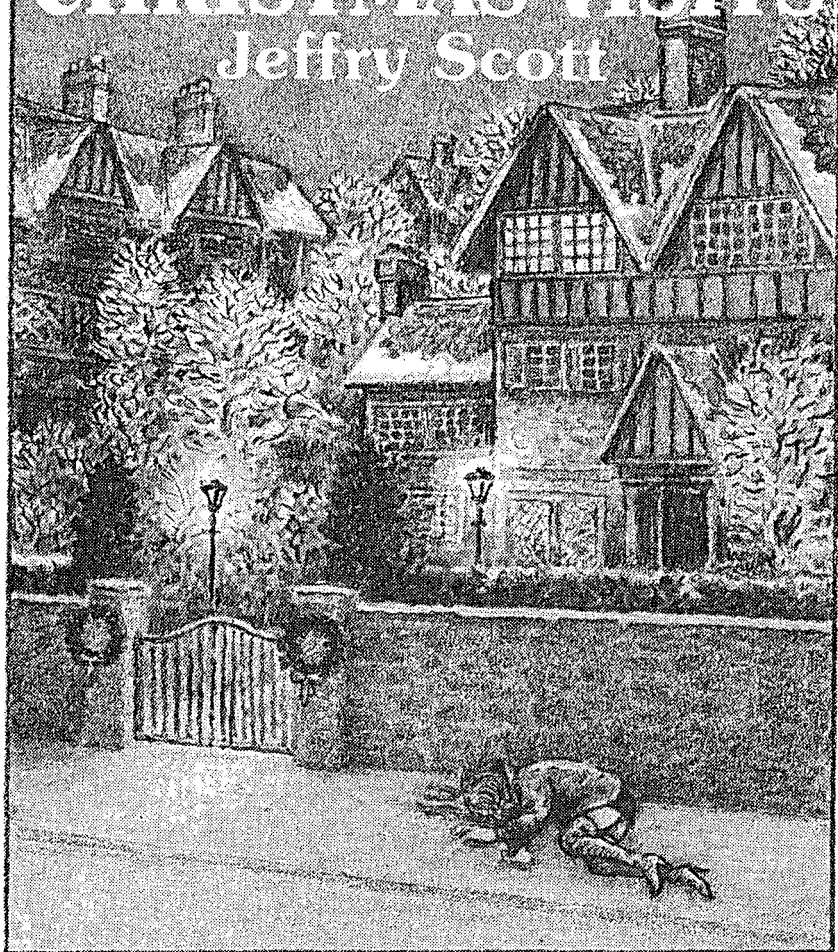


Illustration by Donald Cook

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Coppers are only human, Jill Tierce told herself, without much conviction, after Superintendent Haggard's invitation to a quiet drink after work. Actually he'd passed outside the open door of her broom-closet office, making Jill start by booming, "Heads up, girlie! Pub call, I'm buying. Back in five . . ." before bustling away, rubbing his hands.

Taking acceptance for granted was very Lance Haggard, and so was the empty, outward show of bonhomie, but there you were.

Unless forced to behave otherwise, Superintendent Haggard generally did no more than nod to Inspector Tierce in passing. This hadn't broken her heart. He had a reputation: it was whispered that he pulled strokes. Nothing criminal, he wasn't bent, but he had a knack of pilfering credit for ideas or successes, coupled with deft evasive action if his own projects went wrong.

Refusing to waste time on Jill Tierce owed less to sexism than to the fact that she was of no present use to him. Leg mangled on duty, she was recovering slowly. Fighting against being invalided out of the Wessex-Coastal Force, lying like a politician about miracles of surgery and physiotherapy, and disguising her

limp by willpower, she had won a partial victory. Restricted to light duties on a part-time basis, she was assigned to review dormant cases—and Lance Haggard, skimming along the fast track, wasn't one to waste time on history.

It wasn't professional, then, and she doubted a pass. Superintendent Haggard was a notoriously faithful husband. Moreover, Inspector Tierce was clear-sighted about her looks: too sharp-featured for prettiness, and the sort of pale hair that may deserve the label but escapes being called blonde.

What was he up to? Then she'd glanced out of the smeary window at her elbow and seen strings of colored lights doubly blurred by the glass and another flurry of snow. There was the explanation, Christmas spirit. She smiled wryly. The superintendent probably kept a checklist of seasonal tasks, so many off-duty hours per December week devoted to stroking inferiors who might mature into rivals or allies. She supposed she ought to feel flattered.

A police cadet messenger tapped at the door and placed a file on Jill's desk without leaving the corridor, by leaning in and reaching. He had a lipstick smudge in the lee of one earlobe. Mistletoe had been hung

in the canteen at lunchtime, only five days to the twenty-fifth now.

Big deal, she thought sourly.

The new file was depressingly fat. She transferred it from the in tray to the bottom of the pending basket, noting that the covers were quite crisp though the buff cardboard jacket had begun to fade. More than a year old, Inspector Tierce estimated. Then Superintendent Haggard was back, jingling his car keys impatiently.

He drove a mile or so out of town, to a Dickensian pub by the river. The saloon bar evoked a sporting squire's den, Victorian-vintage trophy fish in glass cases on the walls, no jukebox, and just token sprigs of non-plastic holly here and there. "Quiet and a bit classy," Lance Haggard commented. "I stumbled on this place last summer, thought it would suit you."

Sure you did, she jeered, not aloud. Apart from an older man and younger woman murmuring in a snug corner (boss courting a soon-to-be-even-more-personal assistant, Jill surmised cattily) they had the bar to themselves. "Done all your Christmas shopping?" Haggard inquired. "Going anywhere for the break, or spending it with Mum and Dad?"

Satisfied that small-talk obligations were discharged, he continued before she could match banality with banality, "I've had a file passed to you, luv. Before you drown in details, seemed a good idea to talk you through it."

Despite a flick of irritation, Jill Tierce was vaguely relieved. It was upsetting when leopards changed their spots. Superintendent Haggard's were still in place, he wasn't dispensing Christmas cheer but attempting to spread blame; if she reviewed one of his setbacks, she assumed part of the responsibility.

"I'm listening," she said flatly.

To her surprise, Haggard was . . . what? Not hangdog exactly, yet defensive. Obviously shelving a prepared presentation, he said, "Forget so-called perfect crimes—untraceable poisons, trick alibis, some bright spark who's a master of disguise. Imperfect crimes are the bastards to deal with. Chap had a brainstorm, lashes out at a total stranger, and runs for his life. Unless he gets collared on the spot, blood still running, we've no chance. Or, say, this respectable housewife is getting messages from Mars, personal relay station in a flying saucer. Eh? Height of the rush hour, she's in a crowd and

shoves a child under a bus. Goes on home, like normal. No planning, no sane motive, they don't even try that hard to get away, they just . . . go about their business.

"It gets to me," he admitted needlessly. "Well, this one instance does. Prostitute killed, and what's a streetwalker but somebody in extra danger from crazies? Mitzi Field, twenty-four years old but looked younger. Mitzi was just her working name, mind."

"There's a surprise."

He didn't rise to the sarcasm. "Dorothy Field on the death certificate but we'll stick to Mitzi, that's what she was known as, to the few who did know her.

"She was found in Grand Drive ten days before Christmas three years ago. Dead of repeated blows from something with sharp angles, most likely a brick. I see her getting into some curb crawler's car, and he drove her to where she was attacked. Saw red—wanted what she wouldn't provide, she tried ripping him off, plenty of possible reasons—snatched the nearest weapon, bashed her as she turned to run, kept bashing." The theory was delivered with pointed lack of emotion, Superintendent Haggard back in full control.

"Drove her there . . . the car was seen?" Jill held up a hand. "Sorry, not thinking straight." Mount Wolfe was one of the city's best quarters, Grand Drive its best address.

"Exactly," said Haggard. "Mitzi had started living rough, so she looked tatty. She'd had a mattress in a squat, that old factory on Victoria Quay, but the council demolished it the week before her death. The docks were her beat. She was wearing those big boots, like the movie—"

"*Pretty Woman*," Jill suggested.

"Those're the jokers, long boots and hot-pants and a ratty leather jacket with her chest hanging out—in December! The boots were borrowed from another girl, too tight, had to be sliced off her feet. Walking two miles from the docks to where she was found would have crippled her. And okay, it was dark, but a feller and a blatantly obvious hooker didn't foot it all the way up the Mount and along to the end of Grand Drive without being noticed. Which they were not, house-to-house checks established that."

Taking another, rationed sip of champagne—the pub sold it by the glass, else Haggard might not have stood for the drink of her choice, she sus-

pected—Inspector Tierce frowned doubtfully.

“Grand Drive’s the last place a working girl would pick for business. It’s a private road, and they’re very territorial round there—sleeping policeman bumps every fifty yards to stop cars using it for a shortcut, and if a nonresident parks in the road, somebody rings us within minutes, wanting him shifted . . .”

“Stresses that the punter was a stranger here,” Haggard argued. “Businessman on an overnight, or he tired of motorway driving, detoured into town for a meal and change of scene. Mitzi wasn’t a local, either. Londoner originally, family split up after she was sexually abused. Went on the game after absconding from a council home when she was fifteen. Summer before her death she worked the transport cafes, Reading, Bath, Bristol, drifted far as here and stayed.

“For my money, the punter spotted her at the docks. Then they drove around. She had no crib, did the business in cars or alleys. Maybe this punter was scared of getting mugged if they stuck around the docks. Driving at random, they spot a quiet-looking street, plenty of deep shadow at the far end where the trees are. Must have seemed safe enough, and so it

was—for him. Nobody saw them arrive or him leaving. Some pet lover daft enough to walk the dog in a hailstorm found Mitzi’s body that night, but she could have lain there till morning otherwise.

“All known curb crawlers were interviewed and cleared. Ditto the Dodgy List.” Superintendent Haggard referred to the extensive register of sex offenders whose misdeeds ranged from assaults to stealing underwear off washing lines. “Copybook imperfect crime: guy blew a gasket and got the hell out. Ensuring the perfect result for him.”

“Thanks for hyping me up,” Inspector Tierce responded dryly. She’d been right, ambitious Haggard wanted to distance himself from defeat. Cutting corners to achieve it; in theory, if not always in practice, the assistant chief decreed what files she studied. Unless she made a stand, final disposition of the Dorothy “Mitzi” Field case would rest with her rather than the superintendent.

“I haven’t finished.” But he stayed silent for a moment before seeming to digress. “Know the old wives’ tale about a murderer having to return to the scene of the crime? Laughable! Only I’ve got a screwy notion that superstitions have a basis

in fact. Anyway, a man has been hanging about in Grand Drive recently. Sitting in his car like he's waiting for somebody . . . right where the kid's body lay. He's a local, which blows my passing stranger stuff out of the water—still, I'm not proud, I am happy to take any loose end offered."

But that's the point, Jill parried mentally, keeping a poker face, you're not taking it. And a helpful colleague giving loose ends a little tug just might end up under the pile of rocks they release.

"This fellow," Superintendent Haggard continued doggedly, "has been haunting Grand Drive. Uniformed branch looked into it after several complaints from residents. They're a bit exclusive up there, not to mention paranoid about burglars, scared the bloke was casing their houses. What jumped out at me was one old girl being pretty certain the same chap, leastways somebody in an identical car, did the same thing at Christmastime last year. She was adamant that he was there for an hour or more every day for a week."

He treated her to a phony's smile. "Got to be interesting. Because whatever this man is, he's no burglar. A pest and a pain in the arse, but no record and a steady job, good refer-

ences. Uniforms didn't have to trace him, they just waited, and sure enough, he rolled up and parked at the end of Grand Drive. Nowhere near his house, incidentally, and well off the route to it. He gave them a cock-and-bull yarn about bird-watching. They pressed him, and he mouthed off about police harassment, started teaching them the law."

The smile turned into a sneer. "The man is Noel Sarum, you'll have heard of him. Yes, *the* Noel Sarum. Spokesman for the Wessex chapter of Fight for Your Rights, does that disgraceful column in the local paper, born troublemaker. Very useful cover if he happens to have a down on hookers and let it get the better of him three years ago."

Inspector Tierce set her flute of champagne aside. "You forgot your oven gloves. Ought to have them on, handing me a hot potato."

Lance Haggard spoke a laugh. "You can deal with it. Routine review of the Field case, search for possible witnesses overlooked in the original trawl. Sarum can't object to an approach on those terms—he's always banging on about being ready to do his civic duty without knuckling under to mindless bullying."

"You tell him that, then. It was your case."

"Ah." Superintendent Haggard took a long pull at his draught Guinness. "It wasn't, you see. I've kept myself *au fait*, but . . . no, it's not down to me."

Shifting restively, he went off on another tangent. "My daughter . . . Beth was nearly eighteen back then, but her mental age is nearer six or seven. Lovely girl, couldn't ask for a nicer, but never mind the current jargon, simpleminded. You knew about that," he accused edgily.

Jill hadn't, but she nodded and waited.

"Beth used to go to special school, homecraft and so forth. . . . She may have to look after herself when me and the wife have snuffed it. I couldn't give Beth a lift every day. No problem, bus stop outside our house, Nell sees the girl aboard, three stops later, out she gets. But one night a water main burst, and the bus went a different way. Beth was set down two streets from us. It confused her.

"Nell phoned me, frantic, when the girl was an hour overdue. I pulled rank, had the area cars searching. What we hadn't imagined was Beth getting on *another* bus, she thought they all went to our house. This one's terminus was the docks,

and the driver made her get out. She was crying but he didn't want to know.

"Of course I shot home, and damned if a taxi didn't pull up behind me, with Nell and a young woman who'd found her: Mitzi Field. I recognized her from court, she was a regular. Cut a long story short, Beth was wandering the docks, running away if any male asked why she was crying; we'd drilled that into her, never talk to strange men. Mitzi twigged she needed help, looked us up in the phonebook, and flagged down a cab."

Haggard fiddled with his empty glass. "Nell made her come in for some grub and a cup of tea. God forgive me, grateful or no, I was pleased to see the back of her, the girl was dirty under the paint and dead cheap. Nell, my wife, isn't practical except round the house. Church on Sunday, says her prayers every night. She wanted to help Mitzi, give her a fresh start, once our girl was in bed and I'd explained what Mitzi was. I told Nell to forget it, the best help to her sort is leaving them alone. She'd still sleep rough and be on the game with a thousand quid in her purse.

"Easy to say when you don't want hassle—and how would it have looked, me taking a com-

mon prostitute, a dockside brass, under my wing? A month later she got herself killed."

He put a hand atop Jill Tierce's. "Comes back to me every Christmas, how we owed that girl and . . . we didn't let her down but . . . you follow? It was Len Poole's inquiry, I can't involve myself. You can. Christmas, and I'm asking for a present. Something isn't kosher about Noel Mr. Crusader Bloody Sarum; give him a spin, and help ease my blasted conscience."

Taking his hand back, he blustered, "Any of that personal stuff leaks out, I'll skin you alive." But it was appeal rather than threat. Oh yes, Jill reflected, coppers were human all right—even devoutly ambitious ones.

Noel Sarum lived in one of the Monopoly-board houses of a new estate, Larkspur Crest. For no good reason Inspector Tierce had expected a student-type flat festooned in Death to Tories banners, fragrant with pot fumes and dirty socks.

Like most police officers, she was aware of Sarum. His know-your-rights column in the weekly paper kept sniping at law enforcers. Jill had ac-

knowledgeed that the diatribes were justified in general terms, yet still she felt resentful, attacked while denied another right—of defense. Somehow she'd formed a picture of an acrid character with a straggly beard and John Lennon glasses, spitting venom via his word processor. He was a teacher, too, probably indoctrinating whole generations of copper-baiters. Not that they needed encouragement.

She was taken aback by the man opening the glossy front door of pin-neat Number 30. Fifty, she judged, but relatively unlined, face open under a shock of silver-gray hair. Track suit and trainers reinforced the youthful, vigorous impression. Before she could speak, he beamed and exclaimed, "Why, it's the lame duck!"

Sensitive over her treacherous leg, she bristled, then recognized the face and decoded his remark. It was the Samaritan from that half-marathon in the happy time before she'd been hurt. Talked into running for charity, she'd not realized that the friendly fellow partnering her for the final miles was Sarum, scourge of the police.

Jill had been quite taken with him. He'd struck her as a man appreciating female company for its own sake. If he'd

been ten years younger or she a decade older, she might have tried making something of it. As things were, when the event finished he'd wrapped her in a foil blanket and trotted away to help somebody else.

"You're a police, um, person," he said, returning Inspector Tierce's warrant card. "I wondered what you did for a living, never thought of *that*. Come on in."

The living room contrived to be homely and pristine, sealed woodblock floor reflecting carefully tended plants. "Passes inspection, huh? I lost my wife five years ago, but I try to maintain her standards. Must have known you were coming, that's the coffee perking, not my tummy rumbling. Take a pew, I'll get it—black, white, sugar, no sugar?"

He was just as he'd been on the charity run, chatting as if resuming a relationship after minutes instead of years. Some people did it naturally, and in her experience, the majority were as uncomplicated as their manner. He made reasonable coffee, as well . . . "What's the problem? Can't be anything too shattering, but you're a senior rank."

Disingenuous, Jill thought; he must have a shrewd idea what brought her.

"You've been seen in Grand Drive for extended periods over the last two years. Watching, hanging about. Spare me the stuff about a free country; you put the wind up the neighborhood, and no wonder. It's no-hawkers-no-lurkers territory. Storm in a teacup is your comeback, but the snag is a woman was done to death at your favorite haunt three years ago."

"Two and two makes me a murder suspect, is that it?" His tone was even. Sensing that Noel Sarum savored debate, she gained a better understanding of his newspaper column.

"No, you invited suspicion all on your own," she replied calmly. "Gave my uniformed colleagues some guff about wanting to confirm the presence of a rare bird in Grand Drive, a . . . can't read PC Harris's writing, but he told me the name and I remembered it long enough to make a phone call."

"It's your bad luck that a cousin of mine is an ornithologist—the bird you chose hasn't touched England since 1911, and even that sighting was doubted. However, it's something an intelligent amateur might pick to blind the cops with science. According to my expert." And she smiled cheekily.

Noel Sarum's mouth curved up at the corners, too. "Got me." Then his jaw set. "As a matter of fact, that was my *third* Christmas of going to Grand Drive. Breaking no law, causing no nuisance. Which is all you need from me."

"Believe it or not I'd agree if it weren't for Mitzi Field. The dead girl. Worthless girl, some might say, squalid little life, good riddance. But we don't agree, do we. I've got to account for loose ends, and you're flapping about in the wind, Mr. Sarum."

"Noel," he corrected abstractedly. "The kids call me First Noel, this time of year. Every class thinks it's being brilliantly original. . . ." Stubborn streak resurfacing, he grumbled, "After your pals pounced on me, I went to the *Gazette* office and researched the murder in the back numbers. That winter I was supply-teaching at Peterborough, didn't get back to the city until the week after it happened. The night she was killed, I was chaperoning a Sixth Form dance more than a hundred miles away from Grand Drive."

"Bloody hell," Jill muttered. "What's the matter with you, why not tell the uniforms that?"

Taken aback by her impatience and the subtext of dis-

gust, he shrugged helplessly. "I didn't think of it at the time."

Fair enough, Inspector Tierce granted. People didn't remember their whereabouts a week ago, let alone years later. Though Noel Sarum might be lying. . . .

Guessing the reaction, he brightened. "Hang on, I'm not escaping; just looking in the glory-hole."

She watched him delve in a cupboard under the stairs. Soon he returned, waving a pamphlet. "Here you are, Beacon School newsletter, date at the top of every page."

It was a slim, computer printed magazine. Sarum's finger jabbed at a poorly reproduced photograph in which he was recognizable, arm round the shoulders of a jolly, overweight woman in owl spectacles. "First Noel' got the Christmas spirit, Mrs. May got the grope, and the Sixth 'got down' with a vengeance last Thursday night," ran the disrespectful caption.

"Mrs. May's the head teacher, the kids loved that snap," he chuckled. Tuning him out, Jill found the first page of her notebook. Yes, the date was right, Mitzi Field had died at about nine P.M. that faraway Thursday night when Noel Sarum was hugging the head teacher.

His tone hardened. "Sorry to disappoint you."

"Oh, drop it," she said crossly. "I liked you on that stupid run, I still like you, though what I'd really like is to shake you till your stupid teeth rattle."

Taken aback, he fiddled with the school magazine.

"You've got a bee in your bonnet about the police, fine. But that's no excuse for wasting two uniformed officers' time, and mine. Heaven knows what it is with you and Grand Drive, I don't care."

She broke off, eyes narrowing. "Hey! I think this was a setup. You have an ironclad alibi, so why not encourage the dim coppers to hassle you? Weeks and weeks of columns to be wrung out of that. Cancel the liking-you bit, you're sick. Feel free to complain about my attitude. I'll be happy to defend it, on the record."

Appalled, Noel Sarum protested. "It's not like that . . . setup? It never crossed my mind!" Cracking his knuckles, he glowered at the carpet. "It's strictly personal, can't you people get that through your heads?" After which, perversely (not only coppers are human), he told her the whole story.

Fifteen minutes later, Inspector Tierce said, "Why the

heck didn't you press every bell and find her that way? Can't be that many flats in half a dozen houses."

"What would I say when each door opens?" Sarum demanded. "I don't even know if she's married, she was wearing gloves, I couldn't see if she had a wedding ring. Supposing her husband answered, imagine the trouble I could cause."

"I still can't make out how you chatted her up and didn't have the gumption to get her name, even a first name."

Still high-colored from enthusiasm and embarrassment, Sarum sputtered, "I didn't chat her up. It was . . . idyllic, a little miracle. We looked at each other and started talking as if we'd known each other forever. Somehow I couldn't bring myself to ask her name or give mine, it might have broken the spell."

"Yes, you told me," Jill butted in, lips tingling from the strain of keeping a straight line. The copper-bashing demon she had pictured snarling over his columns turned out to be a hopeless, helpless romantic. Noel Sarum, a widower well into middle age, patrolled Grand Drive once a year because he was suffering belated pangs of puppy love.

Having met his ideal woman one Christmas Eve, driven her

home, and departed on air, he'd been unable to decide which house in Grand Drive was hers. Similar period and the same architect, and they looked different by daylight.

She could understand why he hadn't confided in a couple of constables patently ready to take him for some kind of weirdo. After all, he was the Know Your Rights fanatic, worried that they'd turn his romantic vigil into a mocking anecdote to belittle him. Inevitably he'd been combative.

It was already dark when Jill Tierce left Larkspur Crest. Fresh snow crunched under the tires. She slowed as her lights picked up a group of children crossing the road, dragging a muffled-up baby on the improvised sledge of a tin tray. At the foot of the hill a Rotary Club float blared canned carols, a squad of executive Santas providing harness-bells sound effects with their collecting tins.

Everything went a little scatty in this season, though nicely so, Inspector Tierce mused. She'd bought no presents so far, that was scatty, dooming her to Christmas Eve panic.

Not the least of her scattiness, either. She thought: I can't believe I'm doing this, but

stayed on course towards Grand Drive.

By six that evening, bad leg nagging savagely—it disapproved of stairs, and she had climbed a number of flights—Jill was showing her warrant card and saying with the glibness of practice, “This may sound odd, but bear with me. . . . Two Christmases ago, if you remember that far back, did you go Christmas Eve shopping at the Hi-Save in City Center?”

“I expect so.” The woman's voice was unexpectedly deep and hoarse from such a slim body. “I use Hi-Save for all but deli stuff, it's loads cheaper.”

“I mustn't lead you, put ideas in your head, but that Christmas Eve did you have help with your shopping, like your bags carried to the car?”

“I don't take the c—oh, him, the knight errant!” She opened the door wider and stood aside. “Come in, you look chilled.”

Constance—“Connie, please, the other's so prissy”—French remembered Noel Sarum, all right.

“He picked me up in the checkout line that Christmas Eve. Well, I picked him up, had he but known.” Brown, almond eyes sparkled wickedly. “It was such a scrum, the line was endless, all the trolleys were taken

so I was lugging three or four of those wretched baskets, and he did the polite, offered to share the load while we waited.

"Single men who aren't teenagers are so pathetic, aren't they? And he was kind and clean and cuddly, I really *took* to him." She'd insisted on making them mugs of hot chocolate ("with the teeniest spike of brandy to cheer it up") after Jill Tierce refused a cocktail.

And I could take to a pad like this, Inspector Tierce reflected a shade drowsily. Connie French had two floors of one of Grand Drive's former mansions. Her living room was spacious yet cosy, elegant antique pieces to dress it, costly modern furniture for wallowing.

Ms. French sat a little straighter. "What's this about, dear?"

"I'm glad you asked that." Jill pulled a face. "Officially I'm eliminating a loose end, confirming somebody's reason for . . . never mind, confirming a story. Don't quote me, but I was curious. A witness was terribly impressed by you and . . ."

Connie waited, and Jill said, "It's just that you knocked him for six, he hasn't got over it—and call it the Christmas syndrome, or downright nosiness, but I wondered if you'd felt the same."

"I have thought about him since." Connie smiled weakly, blushing. "A lot, on and off. Look, there is always enough for two when it's a casserole, and a glass of wine can't put you over the limit for driving. Terrible thing to tell a woman, but you look exhausted. Stay for a meal."

They got on famously. A long while later, table cleared, dishwasher loaded, they'd put the world to rights and compared Most Terrible Male Traits (nasal fur, aggressive driving, and pointless untruths topping the painstakingly compiled list).

Inspector Tierce was deciding that she'd better go home by cab and pick her car up tomorrow—should have known she was unable to drink *one* glass of wine—when Connie French became fretful.

"What is it with that chap, Jill? I could tell he fancied me. Oh, not the flared nostrils and ripping the thin silk from my creamy shoulders, he wasn't that sort, but we really hit it off. Greek gods and toy boys are all very well, but what you need is a man who's comfy as old shoes. I've only met two or three, one was my brother and the others were friends' husbands. . . ."

"Tell me his name, I'll ring him." Connie reached for the

phonebook on the end table at her side.

"I can't do that, I shouldn't be here anyway, certainly not gossiping. Christmas has a lot to answer for." It struck Jill that they were talking animatedly but with a certain precision over trickier words; perhaps the Beaujolais Villages in easy reach on the coffee table between them was not the first bottle.

"Wouldn't ring him anyway. My late husband, as in divorced, not RIP, said I had no pride but . . . is he gay? My supermarket chap, not the ex."

"Sarum? Certainly not." Frowning at the alliteration as much as the slip, Jill muttered, "I must make tracks."

"Night's young," Connie said on a pleading note. "He drove me home, I nearly asked him up for a drink—but something stopped me. I wanted him to at least introduce himself first, and after all that, he just took himself off."

"You'd stunned him," Jill said.

"Bull," Ms. French countered. But she was thoughtful. "Honest injun?"

"That's the impression I got. The twit's been keeping a vigil out there in the run-up to Christmas, ever since, hoping to pull the fancy-seeing-you-here bit."

Connie went to the bay window. "Typical of my luck, I never saw him."

"He stayed in his car, from up here he'd be an anonymous roof." Joining her, Inspector Tierce asked, "Were you questioned in the house-to-house sweep after Mitzi Field's body was found?"

"I was playing bridge that night, didn't get home till it was all over." Connie hugged herself. "Just as well. I couldn't bear it if I'd been up here watching some silly TV show while . . . ough!"

"Looks pretty now." Snow crusted high walls and hedges, whiteness and moonlight giving Grand Drive a luminous quality.

"Christmas card," Connie French suggested, making the comment bleak. "I spend hours at this window sometimes, it's like a box seat for the seasonal stuff—carol singers from St. Stephen's in full Dickens costume, crinolines and caped coats and candle-lanterns. Then there are the children returning to thé nest, back from boarding school, or a bit older, very proud of The Car and their university scarves.

"My daughter lives in California, she might ring on Christmas Day, probably will before New Year's. . . . Mum's an afterthought."

To Jill's dismay Connie French was crying silently, a single, fat tear sliding down the side of her elegant nose.

Inspector Tierce woke the next morning with the mildest of hangovers, little more than a nasty taste in the mouth, and a flinching sensation at the memory of her hostess.

The provoking thing was that she didn't pity Connie French. The sorrow had been alcohol-based and transitory; minutes afterwards they'd played an old Dory Previn album, whooping approval of the bitchy lyrics. Connie might have been briefly maudlin, but she was too sparky for extensive self-pity.

No, this was not about Connie, but something she had said or done kept niggling and scratching in the subconscious. Every time Jill recollected the profile etched against the window, decorated by a crystal tear—and the image was persistent, like that pop tune you cannot stop humming—an alarm went off.

"Think of something else," Inspector Tierce advised out loud, competing against the hair dryer's breathy roar. Nearly too late to post greetings cards, not that she'd bought them yet. She *had*

bought some in good time one year. They were in A Safe Place to this day, waiting to be found.

Oh dear, she was better off thinking about the Mitzi Field case. Very well, Noel Sarum was in the clear. He could have printed that school magazine himself, or altered the date, but only in a Golden Age detective story. He'd been far away, and Connie French had confirmed his reason for haunting Grand Drive at a particular time of year. Further, while everyone was a potential life-taker, Noel Sarum belonged at the safest, last-resort end of the spectrum.

And that revived Superintendent Haggard's imperfect crime. She could picture a man on perhaps his first and last sojourn in the city, stopping at a street woman's signal and unrecognized, very likely unseen, driving away with her. To drive on, soon afterwards, taking care to stay away.

"Hopeless," Jill mumbled and, skipping breakfast, went off to her broom closet, cardboard-flavored coffee, and the case file.

It assured her that everything needful had been done. A fruitless check for witnesses to the crime, an unrewarding search for tire tracks, footprints, any physical evidence apart from Mitzi Field's body. Local and then regional sexual

offenders interrogated. Other prostitutes questioned, fellow tenants of her last known address, the demolished squat, traced and interviewed.

Nothing to go on; conscientious Detective-Inspector Poole, exactly the breed of plodder who catches most criminals, had demonstrated that if nothing else. Or had he?

Inspector Tierce stood up awkwardly, massaging scar tissue through her skirt. She hadn't thought the location significant, merely incongruous, when Superintendent Haggard told her of it. Previous reading of the file had left her cold. But now it was different because . . . because of Connie French. Something—*what?*—that she'd said last night.

She'd said so much, that was the snag. Squinting, lips moving silently, Jill talked herself through a lengthy and meandering conversation. Until reaching the point where Connie had lamented an uncaring daughter . . . bingo.

Children coming home for the holidays, of course. That's what families did at Christmas, families and friends of the family. Driven by nostalgia, tradition, the chance to purge year-long offenses during the annual truce, or (if mercenary souls) simply to collect presents, they headed for hearth and home.

She leafed through to a terse section of the dossier, the London end. A few discreet sentences covered Mitzi's life from just before her ninth birthday until she absconded from the council home six years later.

Lots of digging needed. Inspector Tierce felt sorry for Len Poole, and profoundly grateful that she did not have to follow up her idea.

Inspector Poole, a careworn, resigned character, took one look at the name on the file and groaned, "Haggard's got you at it as well, has he? Wish he'd mind his own business."

"Amen to that, but I'm stuck with it. Len, what was that girl doing on Grand Drive? Haggard thinks she took a client to a road full of snobs and busybodies because she didn't know any better. Or the punter was ignorant and Mitzi Field didn't care. Did you buy that?"

"No opinion—I'd need facts to form one, and the only certainty was that she was killed there." He wasn't being awkward, that was how his mind worked. "Long way to go for a quickie in a motor, right enough. Then again, Vice was chasing street prozzies at the time, she might have wanted to get well away from the red-light area."

"Supposing," said Jill, "she wasn't taken to Grand Drive and killed? Supposing she was *leaving* there, heading back to her beat, when it happened?"

"I'm not quite with you."

"She didn't walk all the way, wasn't dressed for it, therefore she went in a car, that's the conventional wisdom. Doesn't follow. A bus runs from dock-land to a stop round the corner from Grand Drive every half hour. She could have taken herself there, right? Visited somebody, left again, and either her attacker was waiting, or he was the one she'd called on, and he chased her out of doors."

"Try reading the file," Inspector Poole urged. "No known sex offenders among the residents, remember. We grilled all Les Girls, whether or not they'd associated with Ms. Field, and none of them had a client in Grand Drive; far as they were aware, that is. Down-market hookers don't keep names and addresses. Her mates were sure Mitzi had never been up there before."

"Yes, but it was Christmas, Len. When we all get sudden urges to see Mum and Dad, look up Auntie Flo, send a card to that nice former neighbor who nursed us through whooping cough. Mitzi Field had a

family of sorts, once upon a time."

Digesting the implications, Inspector Poole said, "Crumbs." He did not go in for bad language. "You do get 'em, the wild hunches. All right, she was Mitzi Field, but her mother remarried, to a man called, don't tell me . . . Edwardes. The stepfather who supposedly seduced the little girl. The mother died in 1984, Edwardes was never charged, lack of evidence, they just took the child away. He'd dropped off the radar screen by 1990, dead or gone abroad, certainly hasn't paid tax or claimed unemployment benefits for a long time. All in the file, dear. I may be slow but I ain't stupid."

"Perish the thought. But that still leaves Auntie Flo and the kindly neighbor."

"Crumbs," he repeated, even more feelingly, "you don't want much. We're talking ten, fifteen years back, and in London." Inspector Poole took possession of the file. "It's a thought, I can't deny it. More's the pity."

On Christmas Eve afternoon, Len Poole rapped jauntily at Jill's office door. "London doesn't get any better. I've had two days up there, and how those lads in the Met stand the life is beyond me. Noise, pollu-

tion, bad manners, homeless beggars everywhere. But I did find a helpful social worker, they do exist even if it's an endangered species, and this chap had a good memory.

"Great idea of yours—but I'm afraid James Edwardes, Mitzi's allegedly wicked stepfather, doesn't live at Grand Drive. He works the fairs in the Republic of Ireland, hasn't been in England for years."

Hitching half his skinny rump onto the corner of the desk, Inspector Poole added innocently, "No trace of Auntie Flo. But I'll tell you who did have a Grand Drive address until recently—Anthony Challis."

Since he had to have worked hard and fast and was full of himself over it, Jill Tierce played along. "Challis?"

"He lodged with Mitzi's family in the eighties. Freelance electrician, good earner, about to get married. But then Mitzi Field, only she was little Dorothy then, accused nice Mr. Challis of doing things to her. Her mother called the police, and then Dorothy admitted it wasn't Challis after all, it was her stepfather who kept raping her." Len Poole grimaced distastefully. "Ugly . . . my tame social worker said he'd never believed Challis had touched her. What it was, they discov-

ered, Edwardes not only abused her, he practically brainwashed the poor kid, said she'd be struck down if she told on him. When it got too much for her, she accused Tony Challis—ironically enough, because he was kind, would never hurt her. She'd just wanted it out in the open, so the grownups would make it stop. Ruining Challis wasn't on her agenda, if she had such a thing, but that was the effect.

"After Dorothy-Mitzi was taken into council care, her mother threw Edwardes out, and Tony Challis went to other digs. No charges were brought in the end—the child was considered unreliable on account of changing her story. Rumors spread, mud stuck, Challis's fiancée told him to get lost, his regular customers followed suit . . ."

"Ugly," Jill agreed.

"Gets worse. Challis is a Wessex man, he talked a lot about this part of the world when he was lodging with Mitzi's folks. Maybe that's why she stuck around, having drifted here. Anyway, Challis took to drink, hit the gutter before he straightened up. Returned to his native heath, as posh books put it, found work as a janitor for Coastal Properties. They own several apartment houses on Grand Drive

and gave him a basement flat in the end one on the left. Too dark and cramped for letting, and it gave them a good excuse to pay him peanuts.

"Mitzi Field wasn't looking for Challis—if she'd had a grain of sense she would have kept well clear—but she found him. Once a month he picked up supplies from a discount hardware store on her beat in dockland. He didn't notice her, which is natural; the last time he'd seen Dorothy, she was a child. But she must have seen him going in and out of the hardware place and pumped somebody there, discovered where he worked."

Len Poole sighed and shook his head. "Just as you said, it was Christmas. Tony Challis is watching TV in his basement one night, and suddenly this shabby little tart is at the side door, saying, I'm Dorothy, Mr. Challis, don't you remember me? Wanted to say sorry, hoped he was doing all right now, she hadn't wanted to make trouble for him. And so on.

"Challis says, and I believe him, he was in a daze while she talked to him. 'Noises, she was making noises,' he told me. She was dead when the actual words came back to him. Mitzi left, and for a minute—the chap's a drinker, mark you—he wondered whether he'd been

hallucinating. Then he wished he had been. Challis hadn't hated *Dorothy*; he understood she was a victim who dragged him down with her, no malice involved. But she'd become Mitzi . . . ruining him and still ending up like that, that was past bearing.

"Next moment, it seemed to him, he was standing over her in the street, holding one of those little stone lions: half the big houses along the drive had them on either side of the porch. He had the lion by its head, the square base was all-over blood.

"He accepted that he must have killed her, but he didn't feel like a murderer. All he felt was scared witless. He slipped back to his basement, washed the lion, and put it back in place. Then he prayed. Been praying ever since.

"From Met Police records and that social worker, I got the names of five people linked to Field when she was a child. Only one was among the residents of Grand Drive at the time she was killed. No problem finding him, he didn't move far, one of those new council flats near the marina. Soon as I said who I was, Challis goes, 'Thank God, now I can tell somebody.'"

Jill Tierce addressed her folded hands, almost inaudibly.

"She wanted to make amends for what happened all those years ago, and he killed her for trying?"

Inspector Poole slid off the desk, his expression mixing wonder and compassion over her naivete. "If you can make sense of the why and wherefore, be sure to tell Challis. He can't sort it out. It's people, Jill . . . she was one of them that gets sentimental at Christmas, never considered she'd be opening a wound. As for him, he wasn't the kind man who'd lodged with her mum. Not any more. She stirred up an embittered semialcoholic, temper overdue to snap."

Len Poole hesitated, cleared his throat. "Nobody's fault, luv, not even his. Though he'll go away for it."

"We got a result, which is all that matters."

"Not what I meant—though there is always that, at the end of the day."

Inspector Tierce's day, apparently over, had a postscript.

She'd wanted to watch the black and white movie of Scrooge for the fifth Christmas Eve in a row but went to bed instead. Her father would be calling "fairly early" to collect her for Christmas lunch, meaning crack of dawn.

The phone woke her. The caller sounded drunk, though on nothing more than girlish high spirits, it emerged.

"We've just got back from midnight Mass, now we can be the first to wish you Merry Christmas."

"Wha? Who is it?" Jill pulled the alarm clock radio round on the bedside table, sending paperbacks, a bottle of cough mixture, and her pain tablets cascading to the floor. "It's twenty to two!" The voice's identity registered belatedly. "Connie, I'll kill you."

"Don't be like that. I rang him after all, you see. And I'm so happy."

"Bully for you. What in the world are you on about?"

"Noel, of course. You let his name slip the other night—"

"Did I, by gum." Fully awake and up on one elbow, Inspector Tierce rolled gummy eyes. "That was very unprofessional."

"Sarum's an unusual surname, only one in the local phonebook, and we talked for hours—" Following squeaks and a rattle, Noel Sarum came on the phone.

"And here I am! Well, I'll be leaving in a minute," he added sheepishly.

Another interlude of cryptic noises and then Connie French trilled, "He's so stuffy, of course

he's not leaving at this time of the morning."

She said something aside, answering Noel in the background. "He wants you to know we're engaged and says I'm indiscreet, the idiot. I say, you must come to our wedding, it'll be February or March. You have to, you're the match-maker."

"Let's talk about it next year. I'm pleased you are pleased, Connie. Tell Noel to go easy on the law in future; he owes me. 'Bye.'"

Lying back in the darkness, a phrase from the Bible popped into her head, a Sunday school fragment clear as if spoken for her benefit: "Out of the strong

came forth sweetness." Something about bees using the remains of a savage lion as their hive. Why think of that? Mitzi Field was battered with a stone lion. Nothing sweet there, that was not the connection.

Connie was gorgeously happy, and Noel worshipped her. It couldn't last, euphoria didn't, yet it was a promising prelude to something better. They might fight eventually, but they would not be lonely.

That was what had triggered the parable of bees and a beast of prey. Out of evil, good can come. "Merry Christmas," Jill Tierce whispered to the pillow.

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THE UPSTAIRS ROOM

Patricia Moorhead



They say when you are in imminent danger of death your whole life passes in front of you. Funny, I can only bring the last three days into focus.

My name is Rachel Rose. I live alone in the little green and cream Victorian on the corner of Church Street and Second, Mr. Rose having passed on a year and a half ago. Our only daughter, Miriam, lives one town away, which is close enough for both of us.

She has a new house, a nice job, and a good husband. She thinks I'm nosy, with not enough to do, so she suggested this bird identification class at the college. Mondays. I enrolled to please her.

Our professor is a very nice young man. His assignment for us this semester is to chronicle a nesting pair or to document a tree colony for at least one month. He said he plans to grade heavily on our journals. I chose that big oak in our front lawn for bird-watching for obvious reasons, the first one being that the upstairs bedroom puts me very near the birds in the higher branches and they can't see me at all. Not to mention weather. And bugs. After the initial class on Monday morning, I took my new bird book and notepads upstairs to turn the bedroom into an observation tower.

Daddy built this house for Mama the year they were married. I have lived in it all my life except for a brief whirl at college just before World War II. Upstairs has just the one bedroom, which was mine during my childhood. There is something about this room few people know. Some stray spark of whimsy led Daddy to construct a hidden door to the attic built into a bookcase. I never liked going into the attic when I was little. Cobwebs. The romance of a hidden passage was lost on me, unfortunately. Our daughter Miriam showed a similar lack of interest in the secret doorway when it was her turn to occupy the bedroom. This room has two windows; one faces south, one east. They both look onto our front lawn, the oak, and the whole street corner. I seldom come up here. Climbing stairs is harder than it used to be. Anyway, my company is mostly daytime company, since no grandchildren have yet come along to discover Daddy's secret.

Nothing much is stored in the attic except a box of Mr. Rose's belongings that I can neither use nor part with. However, I now have need of his fine binoculars.

We live right downtown in the older part. There aren't many neighbors any more. To the east, directly across Church Street, is a little steepled church, one of several for which the street was named. No longer consecrated, it has been a repertory theater, a luncheonette, and an art gallery over the years, all now defunct. It remains unoccupied. North on Church Street, less than two blocks away, is our new City Hall and the police station. Catercorner from me, on the southeast corner, is a sorry motel that I never give so much as a glance. Ever. Past that, going south on Church Street, is the parking lot for Coleman's Mortuary, which faces on Main Street. The southwest corner, shades of the past, is a vacant

lot. I look at the corner of Church and Second all day long, but at eye level. From the upstairs windows the perspective changes. Here, you are looking down on the world unseen, like an Old Testament angel.

I pulled the platform rocker in front of the window facing east and put Miriam's white wicker desk and chair in front of the window facing south. That way I can look and write at the same time. I put the journal and the bird book and pencils on Miriam's desk and sat in the rocker with Mr. Rose's binocs for a few minutes to get the feel of my role as a wildlife observer.

As I explained, this corner isn't heavily populated but it leads to a lot of places, so there is a fair amount of traffic, both cars and people. There is usually plenty of parking and, of course, no time limit. I raised the binocs and looked down at a man standing on the corner in front of the church. For a breathless moment I felt I was face to face with him. Through the glasses he looked near enough to touch. It was unsettling because it seemed as if I should be just as visible to him. I viewed him both with and without the glasses several times, marveling at their power. I watched pedestrians walking, chatting, bent on their own affairs, little knowing how well I could see their actions. I felt like a voyeur, guilty and fascinated at the same time. I also realized it was nearly one o'clock, so I left everything for tomorrow and went downstairs. My programs.

Yesterday, Tuesday, I dressed early, armed myself with the clock radio and a thermos of coffee, and climbed adventurously to my observation tower. I sighted several birds in the oak. I also discovered that finding their shapes and descriptions among the little bitty pictures in a bird book is not too easy. However, I was eager to begin my journal.

- 7:30 A.M. *Tuesday* Seven quail run single-file across Second into a bramble on the vacant lot while I hold my breath for their safety. Quickening traffic pattern.
- 7:42 A.M. Mourning call of a dove, but not from our tree. I can't see it anywhere.
- 7:50 A.M. Several police patrol cars coming and going. The day shift makes its staggered changes from now until nine o'clock. Seeing the boys in force every morning always gives me a nice feeling of security for the rest of the day, alone as I am.

- 7:52 A.M. Cat in the vacant lot is stalking something. I fear it is our seven little Order, Gallinae: Family, Cracidae: Subfamily, Phasianinae. A dusty gray car half a block long pulls up and parks on Second Street in front of the vacant lot directly in my line of vision. I feel a flush of annoyance. Driver remains in the car. Quail fly off. Cat sits in the tall grass and sulks.
- 7:53 A.M. Red Volkswagen bug parks in front of the church. Two young girls leave the car and walk north. Secretaries, surely.
- 7:55 A.M. Man and dog walking eastward on Second on our side of the street.
- 7:57 A.M. Jogger rounds the corner of Church Street and jogs west. Automobile traffic heavy. Birds quiet.
- 7:58 A.M. Station wagon parks in front of the gray car. I recognize the driver, a young woman whom I know by sight but not by name. Works somewhere in City Hall. She climbs out of the car, skirt pulled up, arms loaded with binders and dripping with papers, hedonistic hairdo. She walks back to speak to the person in the gray car. I raise the binocs and thrill to the nearness of them. I feel certain they can hear me breathing, but really I know better.
- 7:59 A.M. The young woman is wobbling off up Church Street, butt flying, hair to the wind.
- 8:10 A.M. Can hear a bird singing explosively. Look where I will, he is not visible to me.
- 8:45 A.M. Dark green van stops short of the intersection beside the old gray car. The man opens his door quickly and scoots around to the driver's side of the van. He looks up the street and down the street all the while they are talking. It is the same man I saw standing in front of the church yesterday. Their conversation ends abruptly, the van drives away, the man returns to his car.
- 9:20 A.M. Sight birds in the topmost branches. Two. Look like miniature peregrines. Order, Falconiforms: Family, Falconidae. American kestrel. *Falco sparverius*.
- 10:10 A.M. The man in the old gray car sits close to the window. I can see his face quite well. Seems agitated, checks his watch often.
- 10:14 A.M. He leaves the car carrying something folded, like cleaning, in a plastic bag. Crosses the street to that awful motel and enters unit 1.

- 10:23 A.M. Hammering noises from the church steeple. Sight a woodpecker. Order, Piciformes: Family, Picidae: *Melanerpes formicivorus*. That man from the gray car is rummaging through a big public trash bin in the shadow of the steeple. Furthermore, he is taking a brown grocery bag from the garbage and returning to the motel room with it. Oh dear.
- 10:28 A.M. A couple knock at #1 and they are admitted.
- 10:30 A.M. Same couple leave, disappearing quietly down Church Street walking south.
- 10:45 A.M. A business type in a suit comes from Second Street, knocks, and is admitted.
- 10:46 A.M. Same man leaves motel walking north on Church Street.
- 10:59 A.M. A white car parks in front of unit 1. Two people get out, rap on the door, and are admitted.
- 11:02 A.M. Same people come out and drive off.
- 12:02 P.M. The man leaves the motel room wearing a windbreaker despite a warm afternoon. It is large and loosefitting, with ample pockets.
- 12:04 P.M. He turns east on Second Street at a brisk walk. I can no longer follow his movements even with the glasses.
- 12:45 P.M. I notice the man is back. Somehow I missed his return. He is standing in front of the church, just where he was yesterday. I watch him for a while. It is, of course, legal to stand on a street corner and greet people so long as you're fully clothed and all, and to shake the hand of whom you please. What real proof have I of wrongdoing?
- 12:48 P.M. I put away the binocs and close shop. I forgot to eat lunch. Besides. My programs.
- 7:30 A.M. *Wednesday* At my post in the rocker. This morning's weather is much like yesterday's.
- 7:35 A.M. Eight quail run across Second Street; I am happy to note the addition. Good omen. Traffic thickening.
- 7:37 A.M. Watch cars and drivers through the binocs. I don't feel as self-conscious about watching people today, nor do I have that skittery feeling about being seen.
- 7:45 A.M. City police are beginning their shift changes. I am comforted by their presence, for I may have need of them today.
- 7:51 A.M. The man in the old gray car drives up and parks in the same spot as yesterday. It's a two-door Chevrolet Impala.

Driver in his late forties, dark blond hair poorly trimmed, sunglasses, wash-and-wear chinos, yellow T-shirt, navy blue and white windbreaker, soiled athletic shoes.

7:57 A.M. Station wagon sighted. Brown and gold fairly late model Pontiac. The same hurried young woman I saw yesterday parks behind the gray Chevrolet. I am watching carefully this time. As she walks past him, she leans over to speak. A folded white packet drops neatly into her mess of books and papers, and away she goes with innocent nonchalance. The man remains in his car and continues his watch checking.

8:45 A.M. Dark green van pulls up and stops in the street as before. The man leaves his car, walks to the driver's side of the van the same way he did yesterday. Feelings of déjà vu. They engage in animated conversation. There is no mistaking this time; I'm watching for the "drop." I take a special look at the fresh-faced driver of the van so I can identify him should I be called to do so.

8:46 A.M. Van drives off up Second Street. The man returns to his auto.

8:47 A.M. I pour myself a cup of coffee and sit in the rocker for a while to manufacture additional courage for my next step.

While gazing through the binocs at this man who so repulses me, I am struck by the pathos of his life: standing on street corners, living in a trash-filled has-been of a car or in a sordid motel room, but mainly going through the drudgery of hours of empty waiting. Is this the fast-paced, glamor-filled drug scene we see nightly on TV? Well, whoopy. Even so, it can't go on. I lay aside the binocs, and walk slowly downstairs. To the telephone.

Whom do I call? I've never been faced with this kind of situation before. This is one of the times I sorely miss Mr. Rose. I hate having to call any government office. No matter which one I ask for, it's never the right one. I always have to explain what I need to three or four uninterested voices in turn.

9:20 A.M. I call the city police. The girl on the line doesn't switch me to anyone else. She listens with great patience and wants to hear all the details. I am so happy to have gained a responsive ear that I pour my heart out to her. I tell her everything I have seen from my window these last three

days. She is very reassuring. She thanks me profusely and cautions me not to tell anyone at all about this, to keep it "confidential." She tells me to stay exactly where I am and someone will be right over.

9:45 A.M. I return to my observation point upstairs just in time to see a patrol car pull up in front, and I am greatly relieved. A quick look through the binocs at the redheaded policeman turns my knees to ice. It is the fresh-faced youngster who drives the green van. He glances up at my window and strides toward the front door. He beckons imperceptibly to Mr. Gray Car standing across the street, who walks rapidly toward my back door. There is no time to run downstairs and bolt the doors. I lock the bedroom door, but the flimsy latch is made for privacy, not protection. I push the bookcase door open, crawl through, and shove it closed behind me.

I check through Mr. Rose's things for something to help me. His .22 target pistol, carefully wrapped in burgundy flannelette, leaps to hand. It feels cold and very heavy. Mr. Rose showed me how to load it once, and had me shoot at the target a few times. I should know which end to point, he said.

It is only a matter of time before that redheaded cop realizes that, even accounting for the tall ceilings in this little house, there is still room for an attic and that somewhere there has to be an access to it.

So here I sit crouched in a corner of my own attic in my own house while two murderous strangers range downstairs from room to room through my beautiful things, hunting for me. I can hear their footsteps on the stairs heading for the bedroom, where they will find the binocs and the journal.

My eyes are accustomed to the darkness now. I can see quite well in the dim light of the attic. Mr. Rose's .22, warming to the touch of my hand, is aimed in the immediate vicinity of the secret doorway, waiting for it to open.

So much for Miriam's bright ideas and her damn bird-watching class.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

Out, out, brief candle. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036. Please label your entry "January Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the September Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 157.



Car Trouble

William J. Carroll, Jr.

The wolf stopped dead in its tracks, turned its eyes into my headlights, and snarled. I hit the brakes, fishtailing my truck all over the snow-slicked road, leaning on the horn, cursing like crazy, and coming to a stop ten feet from where it stood, and it never even flinched.

The wolf snarled again, sniffed the cold air for half a minute, then loped off into the dense, dark woods that edged the road. There was nothing to see then but the road slowly being carpeted by snow, the silhouetted forest on either side, and the black night sky above it all.

After a minute more, when my hands stopped shaking and my heart returned to normal, I lit a cigarette, put the truck in gear, and started forward again, but a lot more slowly now.

A damned *wolf*, for God's sake!

It was nearly two A.M. just then, and I was driving south on Route 507, about forty miles from Tacoma and in the middle of what looked like the start of a blizzard.

I was cold, tired, tense, and pretty damned unhappy.

The highway already carried a couple of inches of snow, and although there was no traffic to speak of, and I didn't think I'd run into any more wolves, I kept it in first gear because my Bronco wasn't wearing its chains and the last thing I wanted was to skid into a ditch.

Well, the *last* thing I wanted was to be where I was, but I drove on, keeping my pace steady at around twenty miles an hour, straining to see into the swirling dark ahead, wishing I was there already, and promising myself that if Delgado wasn't at Pedro's at two on the dot, I damn well wouldn't wait for him.

I nodded some righteous determination to myself, watching my headlights eating up snowflakes, and drove on.

*

He'd called at a quarter to one.

I'd been in bed, sound asleep, dreaming about some sort of life and death struggle I was just barely winning, and the ringing of my phone seemed a very untimely distraction. When I woke and answered it, I guess I sounded a little desperate and not like myself because the first thing my caller said was, "Mr. Virginiak? Is that you?"

I sat up on my bunk, still feeling tense. "Who's this?"

"Delgado, Mr. Virginiak. Spec 4 Delgado?"

Delgado. Spec 4. Clerk/typist. Comm Center. I couldn't quite recall what he looked like because he was just another clerk, but I knew him. My eyes strayed over the glowing numbers of the clock on my nightstand. "For Chrissake, Delgado, it's almost one."

"Uh . . . sorry, but . . ."

"Jesus Christ!" I sat up straighter and rubbed my face to life.

"Mr. V?" he said. "Mr. V, I'm in Portland."

Portland?

"You're AWOL, Delgado," I said, remembering suddenly.

"No kidding," he replied. "I wanna come in, Mr. Virginiak."

"So come in," I snapped.

"I need a ride."

"You need a what?"

"A ride, Mr. V."

I groaned. "I don't believe this."

I swung my feet off the bed onto the cold tile floor and peered out the window that overlooked the Fort Lewis parade field. It looked dead dark and cold as hell.

"I got a ride up from Oakland on a beer truck," he told me with an apologetic hitch in his voice. "But the driver can only take me partway, just up past Centralia. He figures he'll get there about three o'clock or so . . ."

"Check into a motel, for Chrissake. You can catch a bus tomorrow."

"I got no money, Mr. V."

Great, I thought. Just great. "Why are you calling *me*?" I demanded. "Call the first sergeant."

He sighed with remorse. "He don't like me, Mr. V."

"The O.D., then," I said. "Lieutenant Garbett is on tonight."

He said nothing.

I shivered. "Look, Delgado . . ."

"What else am I gonna *do*?" he blurted suddenly. "I don't know no Lieutenant Garbett. What's he gonna tell me, Mr. V?"

"Delgado . . ."

"He's gonna tell me to turn myself in to the MP's down here, but I don't wanna do that, Mr. V. I don't wanna have nothin' to do with MP's. I just wanna turn myself in to the company, you know?"

Right.

"I don't know *what* to do. I don't know . . ." He stopped then and said nothing for a moment, but I heard him take a few rapid breaths, trying to rid himself of the self-pitying emotion that was overtaking him. "I thought you would . . ." But whatever he thought I would, he didn't put words to and went quiet again.

"Look," I began. "You . . ."

"Okay!" he interrupted again with sudden, angry disappointment. "Never mind, okay? I'll just . . ."

"Will you shut up, Delgado!"

He shut up.

I thought for a moment, then lit a cigarette, and, finally, with a lot of "why me?" in it, said, "I'll pick you up."

"You sure?" he said in a disbelieving way.

"I *said* I would!" Mentally kicking myself for giving in. "Now, where will you be?"

"Hey—thanks a lot, Mr. V. I don't know what I'm gonna do if you . . ."

"Dammit, Delgado, where are you going to be?"

"Um . . . you know Pedro's truck stop—couple of miles north of Centralia on 507?"

I vaguely recalled its existence.

"I'll meet you there," Delgado said. "About three o'clock?" he added weakly.

I sighed. "All right," I told him. "Two hours from now, and you'd damn well better be there, Delgado."

"Right!" he said with relief. "Hey—thanks a lot, Mr. V. I mean . . ."

But I hung up then because I was sick of listening to his whiny voice, and under my butt the bunk felt warm, and I really didn't want to go anywhere except back under the covers, but . . .

There I was.

Virginiak's Deluxe Taxi Service, now only a mile or so from Pedro's. It was two thirty and the snow was thickening on the road. Even at twenty miles an hour I was skidding out of the slightest turn.

Delgado had better be there, I told myself over and over.

I was just beginning the turn that would straighten itself into the homestretch to Pedro's when I saw the car.

Off the road to my left in the northbound lane, nosed into some dark undergrowth, its

emergency lights blinking with diminishing vigor.

I slowed up a bit, and then I saw the man.

Standing by the side of the road, planted ankle deep in snow like some form of bizarre winter vegetation, he gave me a vacant stare as I came to a stop across from him, opened the door, and got out.

"Everything all right?" I asked.

He frowned at me, his eyes blinking owlishly behind thick-lensed glasses as if he didn't understand the question, so I walked over to him and repeated it.

He blinked at me a couple more times, then nodded. "I guess so." He pointed to his car. "I . . . uh . . ."

The car was at a right angle to the road, front end leaning down into a shallow, thickly bushed gully that edged the highway, its nose pressed against the base of a tree.

With the snow coming down as hard as it was, if there'd been marks to indicate which way the car had been going at the time it went off the road, they were not to be seen now, but it was clear enough that he'd managed a one-car accident.

I stepped around him to look inside, but no one was in the car, only some cartons and

clothes. I stooped down in front and saw both tires were flattened against the gnarly tree trunk.

He hadn't had his chains on, either.

As I straightened up, I noticed the logo of a rental car company around the license plate.

"Looks like you'll need a tow," I said.

He gave me that "I-don't-know - what - you're - talking - about" look again.

"Are you *sure* you're all right?" I asked.

He sighed and shook his head. "I'm just a little groggy, I guess."

He was a small man under his black topcoat. Fortyish, with curly, red-gray hair peeking out from the sides of the fur cap he wore. His shiny, wet face was squared and hawkish looking with thick black brows, a hook nose, and a mouth that showed a lot of large white teeth when he spoke.

There was a hint of liquor on his breath.

"I just lost control," he told me. "Hit a slippery patch, and then . . ." He shivered. "I've been out here more than an hour. Yours was the first car to come along."

"Better get in my truck," I said, taking his arm.

I walked him over and put him in the passenger seat. Then I went around and got in myself. "I think there's an all-night service station a few miles down the road," I said.

He squinted at me.

"Unless you'd rather I dropped you somewhere else?"

"No. No." He took off his cap. "I need a tow, like you said. I have to get . . ." He licked his lips. "The service station would be fine."

He was older than I had at first thought. More fiftyish, I now guessed, with wrinkles crinkling at the corners of his jittery brown eyes. His hair, plastered thinly and every-which-way on his skull, had a lot more gray in it than red. He reminded me of a bird. I couldn't think what kind.

A black-feathered eagle, perhaps.

"Maybe you should see a doctor, just in case."

He shook his head. "No. Really." He smiled. "I'll be fine."

I hesitated a second or two more, then started the Bronco.

Virginiak's Deluxe Taxi Service. No time was ever too late, no distance ever too far, no weather too foul.

After we'd gone a ways I asked my passenger if he lived nearby, and when he hesitated a bit longer than seemed right, I looked at him. "Sir?"

"What? . . . Oh." He rubbed a hand over his face and shook his head. "I live in . . . um . . ." He laughed and shook his head again. "I live in Tacoma."

"I'm stationed at Fort Lewis," I told him. "My name's Virginiak."

He nodded but did not offer his own name.

Outside the snow was falling harder. "Not a good night to be on the road," I mentioned.

"No," he agreed, glancing at me. "I've been . . . I had some business in Tacoma . . . Portland, I mean." He removed his glasses, cleaned them with a handkerchief, put them back on and shook his head. "I guess I was driving too fast. I should've . . ." He shrugged. "I should've been more careful."

I nodded. "Well," I said, "no real harm done."

He nodded, too, but said nothing more, keeping his eyes on the dark, snow-swept road ahead.

About a mile farther on, we passed Pedro's—where I hoped Delgado would already be waiting—and a couple of miles after that, on the outskirts of Centralia, we came to Rex's Twenty-Four Hour Auto-Serve. There was no one in sight, but there were lights on in the garage office, so I pulled in.

Once I'd stopped, my passenger seemed to wake up from a

dream, blinking and frowning at the garage outside. He turned to me and offered a small, warm hand for me to shake. "Thanks for stopping," he told me. "I really appreciate it."

I shook his hand, then watched him get out and start toward the office, giving me a farewell wave as he did so. Once again he reminded me of a bird, but not an eagle this time.

Something more along the lines of a parrot.

I pulled out and drove back along the highway, feeling curiously less unhappy than I had been.

It was three o'clock exactly when I finally got to Pedro's Truck Haven, over which, I was very glad to see, was an *Open 24 Hours* sign. I parked next to a Matson semi, then hustled through the cold air into the stifling warmth inside the diner. A quick look around told me Delgado hadn't showed yet.

Two men seated at the counter were eating something brown, a third man was aggressively working a pinball machine at the far end, and behind the counter an old man with a crosslooking face was standing guard over a couple of bacon strips on a grill with a spatula held at the ready.

I stood at the counter until the old man reluctantly acknowledged me, then I ordered coffee and took it to a table by the window where I sat and watched the snow pile up in the parking lot.

I figured the storm might have slowed Delgado's beer truck, and I decided to give him a little time. I sipped the bitter coffee, waited, and got sleepy.

At three thirty, figuring Delgado would call if he was going to be much later, I asked the old man if there was a phone on the premises and whether it worked. There was and it did, so I got a second cup of coffee and went back to waiting.

Delgado, I told myself, would pay for this.

More time passed. More snow fell. And I got sleepier. . . .

Sometime between four and five I nodded off in my seat and woke up to the nudging of the old man, who put a fresh cup of coffee on the table in front of me and told me he wasn't "runnin' no damn flophouse."

The clock on the wall told me it was seven thirty.

Where the *hell* was Delgado?

I drank the coffee, paid my bill, and got out of there.

Outside the snow had stopped, but eight inches covered the parking lot. The sun was out, but dull through the

high, gray haze, and it was dead cold.

Where the hell *was* he?

I started the Bronco, turned on the heater, and tried to decide whether to be worried or angry.

The thing was, I didn't know Delgado well enough to be sure he was as thoughtless as he seemed, and as I knew he could have called me at Pedro's but hadn't, he might have been unable to call.

On the other hand, from what I did know of him, it was quite likely that he was just as thoughtless as he seemed, so I didn't exactly know how to feel except cold.

My gas gauge was knocking on empty, so I drove over to the pumps and had the attendant fill the tank. While I waited, I decided that angry was the right attitude for me after all.

Delgado had probably gotten a ride all the way back and "forgot" to call me, the little creep. I mentally kicked myself again for having given in the night before.

And decided that I really had to rework my image back at the company.

I mean, I didn't mind being regarded as easygoing, but I didn't need the reputation of being a pushover. I decided I needed to get a little harder around the edges. Become a lit-

tle less accessible. A little meaner, maybe.

Right.

While all this garbage was going on in my head, I started to light a cigarette, forgetting where I was until the gas fumes hit my nose. I stopped just as the attendant was asking for money, which I fumbled for, dropping my lighter in the process.

Which I mention because, after paying for the gas and driving to the edge of the parking lot, I reached down to retrieve the lighter—and that's when I found the watch.

Cold and heavy, with a tiny white tag dangling from it, it was a man's gold Rolex with minute diamond chips in the dial and the initials *R. D.* inside the band, and it sure wasn't mine.

I realized it had to belong to the man in the Caddy I'd given a ride to the night before.

Great.

The sky was going pink in the east, and a sharp wind was picking up. A snowplow was working its way down the highway south, to Centralia. I lit my cigarette and watched traffic move by, thinking.

I'd lost a watch once.

Nothing like this, but expensive enough to remember the loss.

R. D. must have known he'd lost it by then. Must have been wracking his brain, trying to remember where he left it. That feeling of anxious frustration working through him.

Traffic on the highway was light just then, and if the road north was clear, I could make Fort Lewis in about an hour, but I stayed put, still thinking.

The service station where I'd dropped R. D. off was bound to have his name and address, but I really didn't want to back-track. I would put a "found" ad in the *News-Trib* as soon as I got back, and that would be good enough. On the other hand, it was Saturday, and I had nowhere to be until Monday, and Rex's wasn't much out of my way. Still . . .

A big container truck hissed and squealed into the parking lot, and two men piled out of the cab, moving toward the diner. I realized I was hungry, too.

But decided against the doubtful fare at Pedro's, told myself I'd have to wait until I was back on post, and then remembered a coffee shop I'd noticed the night before—across the street from Rex's Auto-Serve.

Okay. I'd check in at Rex's, get R. D.'s name and address, maybe give him a call, and then grab some breakfast.

I pulled out onto the highway and followed the snowplow south toward Centralia, thinking it would cheer me a little getting the watch back to him.

It cheered me a little just thinking about it.

Back at Rex's at eight on the nose, I parked, got out, and approached an attendant who was shining up a bright red and chrome-laced Mack tow truck. He listened to my problem, then directed me to the manager's office.

Where I found a short, angry looking young man with bristling red hair sitting at a desk and scowling at the paper that littered it. There was a white nametag on his shirt with the name REX stenciled on it.

"Excuse me," I said when I entered.

He frowned at me, then realized I could be a customer and tried to smile. "Can I help you?" he asked.

"I don't know," I told him, closing the door. "I'm looking for a man who came here last night. I don't know his name. He had some car trouble up the road and needed a tow. I dropped him off outside here around three."

The young man's face relaxed into a more familiar scowl. "No trouble calls last night."

"You're sure?"

"I just went over the book, man." He waggled a hand at the window toward the tow truck. "The hook hasn't moved since yesterday."

"There any other all-night service stations near here?"

Rex shook his head. "We're all there is in Centralia after ten."

"Maybe he called from here," I said.

"I wouldn't know," he told me in a bored voice. "Ace, my night manager, comes on at four," he added. "You could talk with him."

But there was nothing I wanted less than hanging out in Centralia for eight hours, so I decided to put the found ad for the watch in the paper and the hell with it.

Virginiak's Deluxe Taxi Service had to draw the line somewhere.

I thanked the young man, got a scowly nod in return, and left.

I had a good, big, semi-greasy breakfast at the diner across the street, read a paper, drank coffee, and smoked cigarettes until nearly ten, when I finally started home.

I made the mistake of bypassing the interstate on-ramp out of Centralia and putting myself back on 507: A half mile out of town, traffic started to

thicken and then became downright sluggish.

My luck was running true to form.

But the next on-ramp wasn't until after Pedro's, so there was nothing to do but go with it, so I settled back, and tried, as I'd been trying, all through breakfast, to recall if R. D. had told me he lived in Tacoma and had been on business in Portland, or the reverse.

It would make a difference when it came down to which newspaper to put the found ad in.

Traffic slowed to a crawl, and exhaust fumes swirled in the frigid air. I wondered what the trouble was ahead—and decided to put an ad in the major dailies of both cities because it wouldn't cost me anything.

A half mile on, I could see the flashing lights of a police vehicle or ambulance off the road on the right—an accident, I thought—and I realized that R. D. would probably run a lost ad anyway because that's what I would've done.

It was an expensive watch.

Inching forward now, a hundred yards short of the accident site, I could make out state police cars, a large truck, and the snowplow I'd followed from Pedro's that morning. I recalled that I'd told R. D. I was stationed at Fort Lewis, so it

would probably be in tomorrow's *News-Trib*.

Just ahead I saw a state policeman waving traffic on, while down off the road other state policemen stood hunched around a small covered bundle in the snow . . .

"Keep moving! Keep moving!" the policeman ordered. "Let's go!"

And then I was abreast of the plow, shifting finally into second gear as traffic began to loosen, then past the big truck with its familiar beer logo, then into third gear, and I was on my way . . .

And that's when I saw the army jeep.

Parked off the road on the other side of the beer truck, with the crossed pistols insignia of the military police, and the bumper decal of the Fort Lewis PMO, and, almost before I knew what I was doing, I was coming to a stop.

Because, somehow, I knew.

Somehow.

Feeling a bit numb, I pulled off the road and parked behind the jeep. As soon as I got out, an officer I semi-recognized stepped my way.

I squinted at his nametag and saluted. "Lieutenant Neal?" I said.

He returned my salute. "Mr. Virginiak," he replied agreeably.

Neal was a small, freckle-faced, feisty-looking young man whom I'd seen on post from time to time but had never met. He evidently knew me, however, because I wasn't in uniform and there was no nametag for him to squint at.

I waved at the cluster of men who stood around the bundle in the ditch beside the road. "What's going on?" I asked him, feeling a sense of dread.

"Hit and run," Neal explained.

I waited, that sense of dread becoming acute.

He nodded toward the thing on the ground. "He was wearing dogtags, so they called us first thing." He sighed. "Spec 4 by the name of . . ."

"Delgado," I finished for him, feeling a chill that had nothing to do with the weather. "Hector Delgado."

He stared at me.

"He's dead?" I asked.

He nodded slowly.

Oh—hell.

"Did you know the man?"

I turned away from him and walked up the other side of the ditch.

"Mr. Virginiak?"

I waved him off and tried to deep-breathe away the feeling of anger that had flooded through me.

"Mr. Virginiak, are you okay?"

Anger—at nothing in particular, but real, churning anger nevertheless—because I hated this.

"Mr. Virginiak?"

Always more than ever, I hate this.

Early death. Wasteful death. Stupid death—I hated it—and the older I got, the more I hated it.

Always more than ever.

Gradually, though, the anger diminished, replaced by a heaviness in my chest that made breathing a bit painful, and then, calmer, I walked back down to where Neal waited, and I explained.

"So," he said, when I'd finished talking, "you were waiting at that diner for him all last night?"

I nodded. "I fell asleep there."

He shook his head slightly. "It's too bad you didn't . . ." He finished his statement with a shrug.

"What?"

He started to reply but just shook his head again, and then he led me down to where a state policeman and two other MP's were standing and where the body lay, partially draped in a gray tarp. The face was covered, but one of the MP's pulled it aside suddenly, and it was him.

Delgado.

And I felt lousy with anger again. . . .

"Lieutenant Davis," Neal said to a tall, grim-faced black man in the gray-blue uniform of a state policeman. "This is Warrant Officer Virginiak."

Davis nodded at me, and I nodded back.

"You're military police?" he asked.

"Counterintelligence," I said. "I was just . . ."

"Mr. Virginiak knew the man," Neal said, pointing toward the body.

I nodded. "That's Delgado," I told him, and then I explained it all again to Davis, who listened impassively and without question until I got to the part where I was waiting for Delgado at Pedro's.

"How long did you wait there for him?" he asked.

"From three until around seven thirty this morning. I fell asleep."

"You didn't think it was strange that he didn't show up?" Davis seemed curiously irritated.

I shrugged. "I suppose I did, but . . ."

"Or that he didn't call?"

He said this in a genuinely disbelieving way, and I gave him a questioning look.

Davis frowned at me, then looked at Neal, and after a second or two more sighed heavily.

"Well," he said slowly, "it wouldn't have made any difference, I guess."

I looked at Neal, who avoided my face, then back at Davis. "What do you mean?"

He shrugged. "Chances are you'd never have seen him anyway, with all the snow. It was just luck the plow driver spotted him." He sighed again and looked down at the body. "Too bad, though."

I didn't know what he was getting at. "What are you talking about?"

Davis looked at me. "Well, the fact is, he wasn't killed outright."

I frowned at him.

"He caught a ride up to Castle Rock in that." He nodded toward the beer truck parked on the side of the road. "The driver had some mechanical trouble and had to hold over. That was around one thirty, and according to the driver, the kid started legging it." He nodded up toward the road. "Looks like he was hit back up the road a hundred yards or so. He crawled to here, probably headed toward Pedro's. Both legs were broken, and he was scraped up pretty bad, but he tried like hell—give him that." He looked back at me and shrugged. "It was just too cold."

I stared at him. "You mean he froze to death?"

He nodded. "That's what I mean," he said quietly. "The M.E. says he died around dawn."

"Oh," I said, getting it now. "Oh."

While I'd been warm and asleep at Pedro's.

"Not your fault," Davis added.

Right.

"No way for you to know."

Sure.

And then he said nothing more, and that was fine with me because I'd gotten the picture and it needed no further enhancement.

I was feeling pretty damned awful.

And I suppose some of that awful got into my face because no one said much of anything to me after that. Not that there was anything anyone could say. Not that there was anything I wanted to hear. I had enough on my mind, and Neal and Davis and the others drifted off, leaving me down there with the body in the ditch—waiting for I don't know what, but they let me be.

Which was a good thing because I wasn't feeling too emotionally steady at the moment. Anger, remorse, and now guilt were settling in, and I needed the time to sort them out. Time to get a perspective on things

that I could handle. Time to get a grip.

After a while, a military ambulance arrived, and I watched while two medics bagged Delgado's body. I saw his face once more, before it disappeared forever, but there was no questioning look on his face. Which didn't tell me if he'd been wondering why I hadn't come looking for him last night. Which is what I was wondering just then.

Which I'd be wondering, perhaps, for a good long time to come.

And then he was gone, the ambulance crunching the hard snow as it put itself back on the highway, and that was that.

Around me, the accident scene was beginning to clear itself of people and vehicles, and I decided to clear myself out of it.

Turning to walk back up to where my truck was parked, I saw Davis pointing me out for another man, not in uniform, who was standing beside him near the beer truck and who now came down off the side of the road to where I was standing.

"You the friend?" he asked me.

I shrugged at him. I didn't know what he was talking about, and I didn't want to know.

"Virginiak, right?"

"Yes."

"Name's Rustman," the man told me, extending a hand for me to shake. "I give the kid a ride up from Portland."

I shook his hand.

Rustman was a chunky, middle-aged man with a raw, red face that was peering at me curiously. "You *are* the friend, right?"

"Yes," I lied because it was easier. "He was my friend."

He shook his head, "Hell of a thing," he said. "Hell of a thing."

"It is," I said.

"Caught the state police call to Fort Lewis on my scanner," he told me, nodding toward his truck. "Soon as I heard his description, I knew it was him." He shook his head. "This is a bad scene."

I agreed with him.

Up ahead, I saw Neal wave as he got back into his jeep and drove away.

"Hell of a thing," Rustman said again.

He walked with me up to the road. We stood and watched the traffic slide by, with faces staring at us from passing car windows.

"Bad luck all around," Rustman was saying. "I'da given the kid a ride all the way, but my brakes went, and I had to hold over in Castle Rock."

"He should have held over, too," I said.

Rustman nodded. "I told him he could bunk in with me for the night at my motel, but he had to be going on, you know?"

I frowned at him.

He smiled at me uncertainly. "You know? To meet up with you?"

"Oh. Right."

"Hell of a thing," he said once more.

"It is."

Davis was getting into his own vehicle, and we exchanged nods, and then he was gone.

"I told him he was nuts," Rustman went on, "hitchhiking in a damned blizzard, but he kept sayin' you were expecting him and he didn't want to let you down."

I stared at him.

"Man," he said with a laugh, "I'll tell you, all he did was talk about what good friends you were."

"Did he."

He nodded vigorously. "Sure!" he said with another laugh. "Talked his head off almost fifty miles, about all the things you and him done."

"Really."

"Like how you and him go fishing up along the Columbia?"

I said nothing.

"Like about that cabin you and him are gonna buy up at White Salmon?"

"Cabin?"

He smiled. "I know all about it. The kid was a nonstop talker."

Was he?

"Hell of a thing," he said a final time. "A real shame."

Back in my truck, watching Rustman ease the beer truck back onto the road, I felt wretched, with my mind traveling at about a hundred thoughts a minute.

A lot of those thoughts were finger-pointing questions, like why didn't you do this, and why didn't you do that, and I had no answer to any of them that didn't sound like some whiny excuse, and the more those questions just hung there, unanswered in my head, the worse I felt.

And what was the garbage Delgado had told Rustman?

Delgado and I hadn't been *friends*! I'd hardly *known* him, and I damn sure had never gone anywhere with him, let alone fishing along the Columbia. I never went fishing at *all*! I didn't *like* fishing. . . .

Dammit! I didn't even like Delgado!

And then I felt like punching something, so I punched the dashboard and hurt my hand.

It was *not* my fault!

He should have called. He should have called and had me

come for him in Castle Rock. He should have called before he started hitchhiking in the middle of the night, in the middle of a blizzard. If he'd called, he'd be alive. If he'd called, I would have . . . what?

Dammit!

I punched the dashboard again, and in addition to hurting my hand, the glove compartment opened.

If he'd called me last night at Pedro's, I would have given him a hard time. I probably wouldn't have driven the thirty or so miles to Castle Rock. I would have brushed him off. Told him to find his own way back and hung up.

Dammit.

He'd probably known that, and that was why . . .

Damn, damn, damn . . .

I sat there and stewed for a good long time.

Long enough anyway for my back and legs to get stiff before I finally decided enough, was enough.

I'd done worse things in my life, I told myself. Much worse, in fact, and I lived with those as I'd learn to live with this.

In a month' or two I'd have settled things with myself, and the thought of Delgado would barely produce a wistful sigh.

At least that's what I hoped.

Anyway, I finally reached my truck and pulled out onto 507

again, but as I did so, I reached over to close the glove compartment and saw the watch there.

I'd almost forgotten it.

The bird-man's watch.
"R. D."

Who'd smelled of liquor and skidded off the road about a mile ahead. Who'd flattened both front tires and needed a tow but didn't get it. Around one o'clock. While Delgado was crawling in a ditch. . . .

And then a hurricane of new questions was suddenly swirling around in my overworked brain, and the first inkling of suspicion took root.

Not that there was much to go on.

No evidence at all except for the coincidence of geography and time—but at just that moment, that seemed enough. Before I knew it, I was pulling into the parking lot of Pedro's Truck Haven.

I needed someplace to hang out until it was time to talk to Ace.

All through that long afternoon at Pedro's, where I sipped beer and pinballed until nearly four, and after, on the drive back to Rex's, I kept telling myself how silly I was being, but it made no difference.

R. D. had needed a tow, so why hadn't he gotten one?

It was like an itch I couldn't scratch, and I had to find out.

Back at Rex's, I'd just parked, got out, and started toward the garage office when Rex appeared at the door as if he'd been expecting me. He led me into one of the garage bays.

Ace, who was working under a truck when we approached, turned out to be a broad-shouldered, broad-hipped black man about my age and height but with a lot of gray sprinkling his black hair. He also had a pair of wary looking eyes that kept shifting to Rex as he spoke with me.

"That's the guy," Rex told Ace, nodding at me.

Ace looked me over. "Help you, sir?"

I smiled. "I don't know," I told him. "I'm looking for a man. I don't know his name, but I dropped him off here last night around three in the morning. His Caddy went off the road a few miles up the road, and he needed a tow. He left something in my car that I want to return to him. He's about fifty, short, reddish-gray hair. He was wearing a black topcoat and a gray fur hat."

Ace glanced at Rex, then shrugged. "Nobody like that last night."

"You didn't see him?" I persisted. "I watched him go into the office."

He glanced at Rex again, who was staring hard back at him. "Nope," he told me.

This made no sense.

"And you were here last night about that time?" I asked.

"Sure I was here." He smiled. "Where else would I be?"

"Would there have been anyone else on duty last night who might have seen him?"

Ace shook his head. "There's only me on at night after ten. I work four to four."

I watched his face for a moment, but it was expressionless. Although I wasn't satisfied, I didn't know what else to do.

I thanked them both for their time and left.

Back in the Bronco and on the road north again, I tried to puzzle it out, in between nagging and depressing thoughts about Delgado.

R. D., whoever he was, had needed help, so where had he gone?

I hadn't dreamed the bird-faced man of the night before, and I had dropped him off at the garage, so unless he flew away, Ace wasn't telling the truth. I could think of no reason why he should lie, unless . . .

Passing that point along the highway that was the site of Delgado's demise, I decided I

was being a fool. Imagining things. Telling myself stories just to keep myself from facing the truth.

If I'd only taken for granted that Delgado had to have been in trouble the night before, I'd have gone out looking for him, maybe found him, saved him.

And then I was passing Pedro's.

Where I'd fallen asleep in my chair, thinking hard thoughts about Delgado for waking me up and getting me to come for him, and all the while he'd been dragging himself along that ditch, both legs broken, cold and getting colder . . .

How did I ever get to be such a hardnosed jerk? *How?*

And then I was along that stretch of the road where I'd come upon the bird-faced man and his off-the-road Cadillac the night before.

The Caddy was gone. Sure it was. Why shouldn't it be gone? What did I think I was playing at?

I'd gone about a hundred yards beyond that point before I got that itch again, so I stopped, cursed, reversed those hundred yards, got out, and had a look.

From the tracks in the frozen snow at the edge of the road, he had gotten a tow. The truck that had pulled him out had wide tires with chains and a

deep Z-tread. I'd seen that tread before, I was sure of it.

Dammit!

Driving fast and angry, I went back to Rex's for a third time, burned rubber as I wheeled into the parking lot, stopped, got out, looked over the tread on the big Mack truck that was parked outside the garage bay, and stalked into the office.

Ace was sitting behind the desk. For a moment I just stood and glowered at him.

"Yeah?" Ace asked.

I said, "I just drove out to where that Caddy went off the road. It wasn't there."

He swallowed. "Is that right?"

"I found treadmarks in the snow from a truck." I pointed a finger toward the shiny red tow truck that was just outside. "That one."

Ace said nothing.

I stared at him until he looked away.

"Around two o'clock last night," I told him in a clear angry tone, "a friend of mine was hit by a car about a quarter mile south of Pedro's Truck Haven. Broke both his legs. The driver didn't stop." My breath was coming hard. "My friend froze to death crawling in a ditch."

The man glanced up at me with a look of genuine surprise.

I stepped up close to him and pointed a finger at his face. "You lied to me before," I said quietly. "You *saw* the man I'm looking for."

Ace licked his lips. "You said he left something in your car."

"He did."

"What's that got to do with your friend?"

"I don't know!" I snapped. "What kind of damage did the Caddy have?"

Ace chewed at the inside of his lower lip, then stood up and poured himself a cup of coffee from a brewer.

I stood where I was and waited.

He sipped some of his coffee. "Look," he said in a scared voice, "I'm sorry about before, all right?"

"I don't care about that."

"I never done anything like that in my life." He held out a hand toward me. "My hand's still shaking, for Chrissake."

I wasn't interested.

He smiled and waved a hand at the brewer. "You want some coffee?"

I wasn't interested in that, either.

"I just work here, you know? It's no big deal, but I can't afford to get fired, man."

"Get to the point," I told him.

He nodded, swallowed, looked down into the coffee cup, and said, "He paid me cash, man." He sighed a little raggedly. "Five hundred dollars for a tow, a couple of retreads, and a new headlight. Five hundred dollars, and he didn't want no receipt. Didn't want no record of him even being here . . ."

"Jesus!"

"Hey!" Ace said defensively, looking up at me. "I'm sorry—all right? I didn't know nothin' about . . ."

"What did he say? Exactly?"

"He said, 'How much to forget all this?'"

"All what?"

"You know. Like to forget about the tow. To forget he was here."

"Did he say why?"

"Nope."

"You didn't ask him?"

He laughed without sound. "Hey, man. Five hundred dollars is a lot of money to me. If he didn't want no receipt, didn't want no record of the trouble call, that's great. I just put the money in my pocket, and that's that. I don't need to ask no questions."

"Did you get his name?"

He shook his head.

"License?"

"Nossir."

"What was the car's color?"

"Black. 'Ninety-two." He shrugged. "Nice car."

"A rental, right?"

He nodded, sipped coffee, and peered worriedly at me over his cup.

I let myself cool off a little. "What kind of damage did you see?"

"Not much," he replied. "Tires blown. Front end, right side, a little dinged. Headlight was cracked. I told him if he didn't want no record made I couldn't sell him no new tires 'cause the boss watches the inventory close." He sighed. "He said he didn't care, so I put on a couple retreads from out back, fixed his light, and that was it."

"Any blood?"

His eyes widened. "Blood?" He looked away from me. "No, man. I didn't see no blood."

"How did he seem to you?"

Ace's thoughts were gone away.

"Ace?"

"Huh?"

"Did he seem nervous, worried?"

He frowned. "I don't know," he told me. "He was a little jumpy, I guess. He kept telling me to hurry up, like he was late for something. Kept saying there was something extra in it for me if I hurried up." He shook his head at his thoughts. "I'm getting something extra, all right."

"Scared?" I said.

Ace gave me a curious look.

"Yeah," he said. "I'm scared."

"I don't mean you, Ace."

He blinked. "Oh. Him." He frowned. "I don't know. Maybe a little scared. More in a hurry, though."

I watched him think for a moment, then I stepped over to the window and did a little thinking myself—about whether I had reason to contact Lieutenant Davis or whether my imagination was running away with itself.

"So, what?" Ace said finally, in a bravely afraid way. "You tellin' the boss about this? Am I out of a job here? Is that what's happening?"

"I don't know," I told him honestly. "If what I think happened did happen, it will be hard keeping you out of it."

He nodded. "I knew it."

I was suddenly anxious to leave and decided to do just that. I'd sleep on things and make up my mind about calling Davis in the morning. On the way to the door I said, "Did you catch the name of the car rental agency?"

"Yeah," Ace replied morosely. "Nor'West."

Back at Fort Lewis around eight, I was in bed by nine, but as tired as I was, sleep

came hard—the events of the past twenty-four hours playing over and over again in my mind like an unedited newsreel—and when sleep did come finally, it was fitful and sporadic. When I finally gave up around six the next morning, it was as if I hadn't slept at all.

I felt and looked like a zombie.

R. D. had not put an ad in the "lost" section of Sunday's newspaper.

If he'd called the paper Saturday, it would have made the Sunday edition—when I called to place an ad in the "found" section, I asked about that.

I decided that the right thing to do was to call the state police and tell them what I knew, but I didn't.

The article on Delgado's hit and run had made the front pages of the *News-Tribune* just beneath the headline article about a fatal fire. Reading the stark facts of the crime got me angry again—not about the stupidity of such a death this time as much as about the cold-bloodedness of the killing.

And partly because of my nagging feeling of responsibility I decided to do a little work on it myself before calling Davis. I was off until Monday and had little else to do except mope around the camp, so I de-

cided to pay a visit to Nor'West Rentals.

There were two outlets in the telephone book, one in Seattle and the other in Tacoma. I took the closer one and found it on the ground floor of a retail highrise.

I got there around ten. A handsome blonde woman in a red and blue uniform was behind the counter, and I told her I wanted to speak with the manager.

She gave me a smile. "It's your lucky day," she said.

I smiled back. "There was an accident Friday night," I told her. "A minor one down on Route 507. One of your cars was involved, and I'd like to get in touch with the driver. I don't know his name, but I think he said he was from Tacoma."

She frowned slightly. "May I ask why?"

I semi-lied. "He dropped something I'd like to return to him."

She considered that for a moment, then lifted her shoulders a fraction. "Do you have the license number?"

"No, but your tag was around the plate. It was a Cadillac."

"Cadillac!" Her clear blue eyes widened a little. "We only have four in the fleet, and none of them at this outlet."

"Oh?"

"We specialize in RV's," she told me. "We always have."

"This was a Cadillac," I said. "Black. '92. De Ville."

She gave me another smile. "Are you stationed here?"

"Yes, I am."

"Good," she said simply. "My name's Brandi."

"Which outlet has the Cadillacs, Brandi?"

"Portland," she told me. "We just had our grand opening down there last week."

Portland.

"Well . . ." I began, but she moved over to a terminal and started punching keys. "Everything'll be in here, Mr. . . ."

"Virginiak."

She watched the screen. "Stationed here long, Mr. Virginiak?"

"For some time. Yes."

She nodded and punched more keys, and while she punched them, and because there was nothing else to do, I admired her poise and efficiency.

Which was not a hard thing to do, but the rosy blush of her cheeks told me she was becoming self-conscious. I forced my eyes away, and when I did so . . .

That's when I saw the picture.

Hanging on the wall behind her was the framed photograph of a woman, bordered with

black ribbon. For some reason, I found the picture striking.

It was not a nice face for a woman. She was middle-aged and grayhaired, her features too strongly carved and shadowed, her nose too prominent to overlook. But there was humor in her eyes. I decided I liked the face.

Taking the black border to mean her recent demise, I found myself curiously bereaved.

"Excuse me," Brandi was saying.

I looked back down at her.

"All the Caddies are on the Portland lot, according to this thing." She patted the top of the terminal. "And none has been off the lot yet. Like I said, they just had their grand opening."

I frowned. "That's strange," I said. "I was certain it was Nor'West."

She gave me a regretful shrug. "Sorry."

"Well," I said, putting on my hat. "Thank you for your time."

"My pleasure," she told me; then she handed me her card. "If you ever need a good deal on a four-wheeler for a weekend, give me a call."

"Maybe I will," I said, pocketing the card and turning away.

"Or you could just give me a call," she added.

I looked back and nodded. "Maybe I will," I said.

In my truck, forcing my thoughts away from Brandi's "poise and efficiency," I sat for a while trying to visualize what I'd seen around the license plate of R. D.'s Caddy, but the red, silver, and blue candy-striped trademark of Nor'West kept coming through. Ace had remembered the name of the rental company with no hesitation, so it had to be Nor'West. But it hadn't been, so now what?

I took the watch out of my pocket and looked it over again for some hint of ownership, but there was nothing. Nothing except the Rolex logo, the initials R. D., and the tiny tag attached, with the number 85 on it.

I tried it on, but the band was too small for me, and then I noticed the tag again and had a thought. I went to a phone booth and in the yellow pages found the listing of the nearest retailer that sold Rolexes.

It was only a block away so I drove over, but it was a waste of time. Majic's Jewelers was a long, narrow little building sandwiched between a bank and a pawnshop, all three of which were closed.

That left me with nowhere else to turn and the question of whether to sit on my suspicion

for another day or call Davis as I probably should have done the night before.

It wasn't much of a question. I would call Davis, tell him what I knew, or rather what I suspected, probably embarrass myself in the process, and that would be the end of it.

But it didn't happen that way.

Back at Fort Lewis, I'd just gotten in the door to my billet when the phone began to ring.

It was Lieutenant Neal. He said, "I thought you'd like to know. Lieutenant Davis just called—they got 'em already."

"Got who?"

"The ones who did Delgado," he told me. "Couple of kids over in Tumwater."

Kids.

"How certain are they?" I asked him, finding it hard to let R. D. go.

"Hundred percent. There's physical evidence, and they're ratting each other out. They got drunk and stole a car in Centralia."

"I see."

Kids.

"You know what they said?" Neal asked in a disbelieving tone. "They said they would have stopped if it hadn't been so cold that night."

Right.

Kids.

I felt foolish.

"Mr. Virginiak?"

"Thank you for calling, sir."

"No problem," Neal said and hung up.

And then, I really didn't know what to feel.

The fact that Delgado's case was settled didn't make me feel any better, I knew that much. In the back of my mind, and for reasons only a psychoanalyst could give, I also knew that if I'd solved it myself—if R. D. had been guilty—I might have felt better. Which is as bizarre an idea as it sounds, but true.

I didn't solve it, though, and he didn't do it, so I still felt lousy.

For the kids who ran Delgado down and left him to freeze I felt nothing at all. I didn't know them, of course, but I did know that, one way or another, their own lives would be damaged for a long time to come—and that was how it should be—but I felt no anger at them.

As for R. D., my suspicions had fallen on barren ground, but I still spent most of the rest of that Sunday thinking about him.

Because the suspicions remained.

Because . . .

Well, because he'd *acted* suspiciously.

Not that I could see what he might be suspected of, but there was something there,

something behind the fact that he'd paid Ace to keep quiet about his accident, something behind the fact that he'd been driving a rented car that hadn't been rented.

Which is why I didn't let it go.

Monday morning it snowed again, and my "found" ad appeared in the *News-Tribune*. Because I'd given my work phone number, I took several calls on it in the office, none of which was legitimate. By noon it seemed that a ten thousand dollar watch was a price R. D. was willing to pay for anonymity.

That afternoon there was a memorial service for Delgado at the chapel. It was short, just as his life had been, and after it was over around two o'clock, I didn't go back to the office.

I went downtown instead. Majic's Jewelers was open, and Majic himself was in when I walked through the door.

I know because that was how the sprightly old man behind the counter greeted me. "Majic," he told me with just the hint of an accent around his consonants. "What can I do for you today, sir?"

"I don't know if you can help me," I said, "but I found this watch—" I held it out for him

to see "—and I'm trying to locate its owner."

He frowned at the watch, then up at me. "This is a beautiful watch."

"Can you tell me what this tag means?"

He kept his frown on me. "I think so," he said; then he squinted at my nametag and cocked his head to one side. "You have a good Slav name."

I smiled at him.

He held a hand out for me to shake. "I am from Dubrovnik."

I shook his hand. "I was born in Montenegro."

"Really?" he said in an isn't-that-interesting, let's-talk-about-the-old-country way.

I lost the smile and put on a let's-get-down-to-business face. "As I was saying . . ."

"It's a service tag," he told me, taking the watch from my hand and looking it over. "A very fine watch. New."

"That's what I thought," I said. "Would it be possible to find out where the servicing was done and then backtrack to locate the owner?"

"It's possible," he said. "When did you immigrate?" he asked.

I didn't want to go into that, so I said nothing.

His eyes twinkled at me. "None of my business," he said, shaking his head in self-rebuke. "I'm sorry. I'm just an old

man who likes to yak, yak, yak, you know?"

I knew, but his eyes had suddenly lost their twinkle, so I sighed and said, "I came to the United States in 1955."

"Really?" he said with a mixture of dreamy curiosity and sympathy. "Just a boy. Just a boy."

I nodded. "Could you tell me," I said with a lot of firmness, "how I might locate the retailer who took this in for servicing?"

"You might check with the area distributor. They have offices in Seattle."

"I see," I said, thinking I was wasting my time. "Well . . ."

"I came to this country in 1972."

"There was trouble then, I know," I told him.

He shrugged. "Trouble—I suppose you could call it trouble." He sighed. "But that's ancient history."

"There's trouble now, too."

"Yes," he said sadly. "Always trouble."

"Do you have people there still?"

"Some cousins, I think," he replied. "No one else, above ground."

I nodded. "I see."

He blinked at me behind his glasses. "Tito had my wife killed in '72."

"I'm sorry," I said.

He wagged his head. "Twenty years now. Ancient history."

For him it would always be current events, I thought. "Well," I said, holding my hand out for the watch, which he gave to me, "Thank you for your time, Mr. Majic."

He cleared his throat, gave me a slightly guilty look, and said, "That watch was turned in to me for customizing two weeks ago."

I stared at him.

He smiled. "I'm an old man who likes to yak, yak, yak."

I laughed. "Do you have the customer's name?"

"Of course," he said. He stepped over to the cash register and opened an accounts book. "That's a twelve thousand dollar watch you've got there, young man. A record must be kept in case . . . ah! Here it is." He bent down to peer at what was written there. "The customer's name is Mrs. Claire Dixon." He looked at me. "She picked it up last Thursday afternoon."

For some strange reason the name sounded familiar.

"Do you have her address?"

He frowned down again at the book. "Twenty-one twenty Fairview Road. This is out by Meridian Lake, I think."

The address sounded familiar, too.

"Something wrong?" the old man asked me.

"No," I told him. "Well, thank you again"

"Are your parents . . ." He let the question dangle, as if he were being indelicate.

He was and he wasn't.

I said, "Tito had them killed in '54."

I found Fairview with no trouble at all, as it was the second turn I came to after leaving the highway, but looking for 2120 took me all the way around to the back end of a canyon. I'd just passed 1990 and come to an intersection when I saw a mailbox lying in a driveway with the number 2120 stenciled on its side.

I stopped, got out, and looked.

The mailbox had been run over. There were the tracks of a truck in the snow leading up to it and beyond it along the driveway.

And the truck had probably been a firetruck. There were similar tracks all over the snow-covered front lawn, and the large house that used to be 2120, which I could just make out through the trees that hedged the driveway, was now a huge pile of blackened brick and charred lumber.

There was, in fact, little left that even suggested a house.

A wide strip of yellow plastic tape was stretched across the driveway, and all around the property as far as I could see, with the words TACOMA FIRE DEPT.—DO NOT CROSS repeating itself on it, so I didn't cross it.

I didn't even feel like crossing.

I just stood there, realizing why the name Dixon and the address had sounded familiar to me when Majic had read it out of his book. In addition to the story on Delgado's accident, the fire here at Meridian Lake had also made the front page, and I'd looked at it, not very carefully but enough for the name and address to ring a bell.

In the center of the pile of blackened rubble a man came into view. I moved along the edge of the DO NOT CROSS tape over the driveway until he looked up and noticed me.

"Can I help you?" he called in a bored, irritated way.

"I don't know," I told him.

He began to trudge over the rubble toward me.

He was a tall man, ruddy-faced with longish blond hair. He wore a pair of dirty bluejeans under a yellow poncho and knee-high black rubber boots.

He looked my age, and a little angry, and as he stopped in

front of me, he gave me one of those put-up-or-shut-up looks.

I smiled at him. "I'd like a little information."

A gold badge was pinned to his jacket, and I guessed he looked on me as a kind of trespasser. Not on his property but into his thoughts, and he didn't want me there.

"I'm trying to return a watch," I said.

"A what?"

"A watch," I said again, taking it out of my pocket and showing it to him. "A man I gave a lift to the other night left it in my truck. I don't know his name, but I did find out that a Claire Dixon, who lived at this address, picked this watch up last week at Majic's Jewelers where it'd been turned in for servicing."

"May I see it?" He took it from me, looked at it and at the initials inside the band. He looked back up at me. "Ralph Dixon."

"Ralph Dixon?"

"He was killed in the fire Saturday morning. He and his wife Claire."

I stared at him.

Dead?

"My name is Gorman, Tacoma Fire Department."

"Virginian," I replied, giving him my hand to shake and feeling a bit stunned. "So—he's dead?"

"They don't come any dead."

At least the mystery of why he hadn't answered my found ad was solved.

"This happened Saturday morning, you say?" I asked.

"Around seven o'clock."

I put the watch away.

Gorman kicked at a charred piece of something on the ground by his feet. "When did you say you gave him a lift?"

"Friday night," I told him.

"Around two thirty in the morning. He'd run his car off the road and had a couple of flats."

"Where was this?"

"Just north of Centralia. He said he was on his way—" I spread my hands to indicate the blackened mess that surrounded us—"home."

"Well," Gorman said with a short, humorless laugh, "he made it." He turned and faced the wreckage again, stuffing his hands inside his jacket.

I stood there with him for a moment, a bit curious about what he was doing there but not really curious enough to ask. I finally decided to leave, and I'd just opened my mouth to thank him when he glanced at me and said, "These old woodies go up fast once they're lit."

"Do they," I said.

He nodded.

I lit a cigarette. "How'd it start?"

He hesitated, then looked back at me. For a moment he said nothing—this was none of my business, and he probably had better things to do than satisfying the curiosity of some passing soldier.

But I waited him out.

Because for some reason I felt we were connecting, in the funny way people do sometimes that can't really be explained. I didn't think he'd brush me off, and he didn't.

Instead, he ducked under the tape and led me over to the far end of the driveway where a variety of blackened, twisted things lay under a plastic tarp. He pulled it away roughly.

"This," he said, pointing to one of the unrecognizable lumps, "was an electric heater." He squatted down and broke off a brittle piece of fabric that seemed to cover it. "We found the heater next to the bed where we found the bodies. Looks like it was placed too close, and some of the bedding fell onto it." He crumbled the piece of burned fabric in his hand. "This stuff," he told me with a slow headshake. "If people could only see how it burned." He stared at the black remains in his hand, then wiped it on his poncho and heaved a big sigh.

A brisk gust of wind came along just then and whipped up some snow, and we turned our backs to it.

"So," I said to Gorman, "is that it?"

"What do you mean?"

"The reason I ask," I told him, letting a little self-deprecation into my voice, "is that Dixon was acting a little suspiciously Friday night."

"In what way?"

I explained to him about the cash incentive Dixon had given to Ace to forget he'd gotten the tow, and also the mystery of the Nor'West rental car that hadn't been rented.

Gorman listened with a thoughtful frown. "Ralph Dixon owned a company called Dixon Enterprises," he said. "Nor'West Rentals, which his wife founded, was a subsidiary. They just opened a new outlet in Portland."

"I see," I said, putting it together myself. "He was down there for the opening and probably just drove the Caddy off his own lot. Who's going to question the boss, right?"

Gorman nodded. "And," he added with a smile, "Dixon's wanting no record of his having been in an accident might have something to do with the fact that he had no driver's license. That came up when we were trying to do the identification."

I nodded, feeling silly.

"Thought you had a big mystery on your hands, didn't you?"

"Something like that," I admitted. "But—Dixon *was* identified, right?"

"Oh, sure," he replied. "It was Dixon all right. Both bodies were pretty well devastated, but dental records gave us a positive I.D. on them yesterday."

"No doubt about its being an accident, right?"

He grinned. "Who are you anyway?" he asked.

I showed him my I.D., as if that explained anything, then said, "It *was* an accident, wasn't it?"

He said nothing for a long moment, and I thought he simply wasn't going to answer, but then he shrugged and said quietly, "No reason to think otherwise."

I nodded and waited.

"Large insurance policies just make me a little paranoid," he said. "Two million on the house and contents, a million apiece on the victims."

"That's a lot of money."

He nodded. "Damn right it's a lot."

"Who are the beneficiaries?"

"The policies were carried by and payable to Dixon Enterprises, Inc. I suppose the heirs of the company are the benefi-

ciaries. A son and a daughter. The daughter is a paraplegic, lives in a nursing home in Seattle—some kind of neurological disorder. The son has a Tacoma address, but he's been staying at a hotel in Portland. He's been supervising operations at the new store."

"He was definitely in Portland Saturday morning?"

"He was definitely there. At work when the house went up, and it went up fast. Very fast. The smoke alarm triggered a station alarm at five minutes after seven, and by the time the first trucks got here at seven twenty, the house was engulfed."

"There were smoke alarms?"

"Apparently the victims slept through them."

"Is that unusual?"

He wagged his head in a noncommittal way. "A little unusual, but these were older folks, and they're more easily overcome by smoke."

I nodded, tossed a cigarette to the ground, and crushed it out. "So," I said, "you're satisfied it wasn't arson?"

He stared at me.

I shrugged at him.

He gave me a pained look. "I shouldn't be talking this way."

I nodded and waited.

His look became mildly exasperated; then he sighed and looked back out over the rub-

ble. "If it was arson, it could've been done in any of a dozen ways, but there's no physical evidence left to prove it."

"But?"

"My office is not conducting an investigation, if that's your question."

I nodded. "But?"

Gorman stared at me for a long moment, then laughed and shook his head. "*But*," he told me, "I've got this feeling. Like an itch I can't scratch, and it's driving me nuts."

I nodded. "I think I know just what you mean."

But the itch I couldn't scratch was gone, and on the drive back to camp—although I had no right to—I felt, oddly enough, better about things.

I hadn't solved the problem of my own shortcomings, Delgado was still dead, and Ralph Dixon had nothing to do with any of it, and now he was dead, too, but somehow, after my talk with Gorman, sorting through it all, having it make sense to me in a logical way, my mind was eased.

I don't know why, but that's how it was.

And Gorman's problem was Gorman's.

So I began, in the slow way our minds do such things, to turn my thinking forward, putting the past in its place.

But I still had the watch, which belonged to the heirs.

Back on post, a look through the Tacoma telephone directory gave me a listing for Dixon Enterprises. When I called and explained myself to the woman who answered, she gave me the name and number of a lawyer named Stephens, who wasn't in but would return my call.

I then called the *News-Tribune* to stop the found ad, because Ralph Dixon wasn't going to be calling me, and I also called Rex's Auto-Serve and talked briefly with Ace—enough to put his mind at rest about his job because his larcenous little escapade could stay our secret.

That left me with one more call to make.

Because there had never really been any "maybe" about it.

Friday night at a quarter to five, at the start of another snowstorm, I arrived at the Tacoma outlet of Nor'West Rentals, where I'd arranged to meet Brandi for our dinner date. As I entered, she gave me another of those I've-got-your-number smiles that, for me, at least, were beginning to be something like her trademark.

She and another woman were working with a couple of customers just then, so I seated myself in a chair against the

wall opposite the counter and, while I waited, watched Brandi work, which was an easy thing to do.

Conscious of, and a little amused by, my staring, she kept looking at me, and because I knew it was making her nervous, I finally looked away, just as I had on Sunday.

Once again, my eyes were taken by the portrait of the woman on the wall behind the counter.

Who would be, I realized, the late Claire Dixon.

For some reason, the strong-featured woman's face now made me feel a bit uncomfortable, which for me was a strange thing because I am not an overly sensitive person, at least not to things I can't put my finger on, and it seemed to me that the reaction this picture was provoking in me was overly something.

It gave me the willies, in fact.

I looked away, out the front window at the snow that was flurrying down outside. It was twilight now, and along the street store lights were just beginning to bloom. As I watched, Majic's neon name flickered to light a block away.

Where Claire Dixon had bought her husband the Rolex.

Not for the first time this week, my thoughts went back to my little talk with Majic.

Thoughts about Yugoslavia, an eternal war zone where I had roots but of which I had no memories, and uncomfortable thoughts about my parents.

Whom I knew only through an aged and grainy black and white wedding photo that sometime, somewhere, I'd mislaid and could only now vaguely remember.

The grinning, broken-nosed face of my father, younger in the picture than I am now, his arm proprietorially over my mother's shoulder; she smiling tolerantly, her face alive and amused, her eyes large and wise . . .

And in that instant I thought I knew something.

"Just finishing up," Brandi said as her customer departed.

I looked over at her, then beyond her and back at the picture on the wall, felt a sudden chill that had nothing to do with the cold.

I walked to the counter and looked at the picture closely, trying to remember, trying to imagine . . .

"What's wrong?" Brandi asked me in a mildly startled way. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"That's Claire Dixon, isn't it?" I said, nodding toward the portrait.

"Yes," she said. "Quite a lady. We're going to miss her a lot around here."

"Her husband Ralph, did you ever meet him?"

"I've seen him," she told me with a hunch-shouldered shiver. "When I think of what happened . . ."

"He was a small man, right? About fifty? Wore heavy-lensed glasses?"

"I don't really remember him very well, but I think he had to be older than that." She cocked her head at me. "You met him?"

"I thought I had," I told her. "Last Friday night. The night before the fire. I met him on the road just north of Centralia. He'd driven his car off the highway . . ."

She was shaking her head. "That couldn't have been him."

"Why not?"

"He couldn't drive."

"You mean," I said, recalling what Gorman had told me on Monday, "he didn't have a license, right?"

"I mean he couldn't drive," she said. "Ralph Dixon was blind."

"Legally blind?"

"Ralph Dixon was stone blind," she told me with certainty. "He had diabetes." She shook her head. "The only thing that poor man could drive was a cane."

Which of course led to other questions.

The answers to which led to, among other things, the cancellation of the dinner I'd promised her, at least for that night, there being certain priorities in matters like those.

Not, as it turned out, that much got done that night, or even the next day when I had another talk with Gorman—Lieutenant Peter Gorman, chief investigator of the Tacoma Fire Department—during which talk we both said things that surprised us.

And left us both pretty well horrified.

Sunday, though, was the day things got done.

The morning had been cold and clear, but when I arrived at the coffee shop around the corner from the Tacoma Nor'West Rentals outlet at ten, still more snow was beginning to wisp around the streets in large flakes. I wondered if some kind of record was being set.

Dixon had gotten there before me and had taken a table by the window. We spotted each other as soon as I entered.

He looked less like a parrot today and more like a vulture.

"Well," he said, standing up, his eyes widening behind his heavy glasses as he saw my uniform. "I didn't know you were in the army."

I took off my coat and dropped it over a chair. "I told you I was stationed at Fort Lewis, Mr. Dixon."

"Ah yes," he said, frowning at the memory. "So you did."

We shook hands, sat down, then I took out the watch, saying, "This, I believe, belongs to you."

"Yes," he said, picking up the watch. "I looked for it everywhere. I'm really glad you called."

"That's a valuable watch," I told him. "You should be more careful."

He smiled. "I should."

I smiled back. "But—no harm done, right?"

His smile broadened.

We are going to be good buddies.

A waitress came and went with my order for coffee, and when she'd gone I said, "I had a hard time tracking you down."

"I can't see how you did it," he told me with a polite touch of awe in his voice. "But I'm glad you did."

I lit a cigarette, then smiled. "It was almost as if you didn't want to be found, actually." I smiled a bit more. "You know what I mean?"

He frowned slightly and shook his head.

"After I found the watch in my truck, I tried to get a lead on you through the service sta-

tion where I dropped you off. But they had no record of making a trouble call Friday night."

His frown melted into a look of mild concern. "Well . . ."

"And then," I went on, "when I talked with the night manager—" I smiled some perplexity at him. "—he told me you'd paid him cash to forget he'd seen you."

He blinked, frowned, then smiled and cleared his throat. "Well," he said. "You know how it is."

I smiled back at him. "I'm sure you had your reasons, Mr. Dixon."

He nodded.

"And," I went on, "I'm sure you also had a reason for not putting a lost ad in the paper, or checking to see if I'd placed a found ad—which I did, by the way."

He started to rise. "Well," he said in a this-has-been-fun way, "I really have to be getting back to the office . . ."

"Stick around, Bob."

"Excuse me?"

"You don't mind, do you?" I said, "if I call you Bob, that is?"

He blinked.

"Or do you like Robert?" I asked.

He laughed. "It's been nice meeting you, Mr. Virginiak, but I . . ."

"Sit down, Bob," I told him, losing the smile. "I mean it."

His own smile stayed in place for a moment but then seemed to rot on his face as the hint of an idea that there was more going on than just the return of his watch began to grow in the back of his mind.

"I don't understand," he told me, still half out of his seat.

"Neither do I," I told him truthfully. I waved a hand toward his chair. "Why don't you just sit and listen. This will go a little easier that way."

He hesitated, but then sat down. "I don't know what you're . . ."

"I just want a few minutes of your time, Bob. I think you owe me at least that," I added, pointing to the watch in his hand.

The waitress came with my coffee. "Don't you want to know how I found you?" I asked.

He licked his lips but said nothing.

"The watch," I said. "I found out where your mother took it in for customizing."

"Oh."

"At Majic's," I told him. "That's right around the corner from here."

"Ah," he said. "Very good . . ."

"I got your mother's name and address, and I drove out there Tuesday. It was quite a

mess, Bob. I was sorry to hear about your parents."

"It was—a terrible shock, and I . . ."

I laughed. "Knock it off."

He stared at me as if not quite understanding, and I stared back at him with a lot of nonunderstanding myself.

He cleared his throat. "Mr. Virginiak, I . . ."

"The funny thing is," I told him, "at first, I thought you were your father and that you'd been killed in the fire. Because of the watch, of course. You have the same initials as your father, R. D., and I thought it was his watch, and that he was the one who dropped it in my truck. And, because you told me you were on your way home, to Tacoma, I naturally thought you'd gone home, and just as naturally, I thought you'd been killed in the fire."

He still only stared at me, not blinking, not moving, just waiting.

"But then . . ." I laughed and shook my head. "This is the really weird part, Bob . . ."

His beetle brows furrowed together.

" . . . I was in your Tacoma store the other night, and I saw your mother's picture on the wall. I'd seen it on Sunday, and now I was seeing it again, and . . . well . . . there was something about it . . . and I

have to tell you I got this chill up my spine." I held a hand out to him. "I mean—it was *you*, Bob. Just the way you looked when I picked you up Friday night."

He glanced down at the tabletop then and nodded.

"You really do take after her, Bob."

He nodded again slightly.

"The resemblance is very close."

He looked back up at me, and his jittery eyes had begun to work overtime, reflecting a lot of activity behind them.

"So," I said pleasantly, "I'm standing there, right? I'm wondering what the story is—because husbands don't take after their wives. Children take after their parents."

He nodded.

"And then I finally got it."

Dixon smiled back at me for some reason.

"I had the *son* in my truck! You, Bob. You, with your own watch—because your father, being blind, wouldn't need one."

"I see," he said, as if the dawn had finally broken. "So that's how you found me."

"That's it," I agreed.

Our waitress came and gave us both refills. When she'd gone, he said, "That's quite a little detective story."

"All part of the service," I told him with a big smile.

He smiled back and then made getting up motions again. "But now I really have to be going . . ."

"I talked with a fire inspector named Gorman on Monday."

Dixon froze in his seat, his eyes widening.

"There seems to be a question or two about the cause of the fire."

His mouth sagged open.

"There also seems to be some question about your whereabouts Friday night."

He closed his mouth and cocked his head. "What questions?" he asked. "What are you implying?"

I shrugged. "I'm not implying anything, Bob. I'm saying there are questions. I think the answers add up to murder and arson."

His mouth sagged open again.

"Close your mouth, Bob."

"This is outrageous . . ."

"Exactly."

"I don't have to sit here and . . ."

"I could always go back and have another talk with Gorman."

He stared at me then for a long while because we were at a kind of crossroads now, and he knew it, and the way he chose then would set his direc-

tion for the rest of his life. That kind of decision deserved a bit of time, and Dixon took it.

Finally he looked away, to the snow-flurried street outside. "What do you want?"

I smiled.

He smiled sickly back. "What does this Gorman person say?"

"Not very much," I replied. "When I spoke with him Monday, he wasn't officially investigating the fire, but he seemed a little curious."

"What did you tell him?"

"That I gave Ralph Dixon a lift to a service station last Friday night. That he'd had some car trouble on the road. That I wanted to return his very expensive watch."

Dixon said nothing.

"Gorman saw nothing wrong with that," I explained, "because he hadn't done any checking and didn't know that your father was blind and couldn't drive."

Dixon squinted one questioning eye at me. "What do you want?" he said.

I frowned for a moment, then shrugged.

Dixon kept his one-eyed squint on me for a few seconds more. Then he nodded slightly, sipped some of his now cold coffee, made a face at it. "All right," he said pleasantly. "Keep the watch." He put it

down on the table between us and waved a hand at it.

"I don't understand."

"I said, keep it. That's a twelve thousand dollar watch."

"I want more than that, Bob."

"I'm *not* a rich man."

I laughed at him.

"Look," he said in a harsh whisper, "I don't have the money now, but soon I'll be able to pay you—ten thousand dollars."

I shook my head. "I want more, Bob."

"For God's sake, what do you think I am?"

"A watch like this," I told him, holding it up, "demands a lifestyle, my salary just wouldn't support."

"How much do you want?"

"We'll get to that in a moment," I told him. "First I want to know how you did it."

"What do you care?"

"I want to know the kind of man I'm doing business with, Bob." I finished my coffee. "If I don't come forward with what I know, I may be considered an accessory, so I need to know just how careful a man you are."

He looked away.

"So help me God," I said, putting a lot of you'd-better-believe-it-or-else in my voice, "if you don't talk to me, I'm going straight to Gorman and tell

him every damn thing I know, and I damn well know what you did."

"Okay!" he blurted in a whisper. "Okay." He rubbed a hand across his face and sighed. "What do you want to know?"

"It's a three hour haul from Portland," I said. "Why didn't you fly up?"

"There'd be a record of my being on the flight."

"I see," I told him with mild appreciation. "But why didn't you drive your own car? Why did you take one of the rentals?"

"My own car was in the hotel parking lot. If I had taken it, it might have been seen."

"I see," I said. "What time did you leave?"

"Around seven," he replied irritably. "Is this really necessary?"

"So, you got to your parents' house about ten?"

He rolled his eyes with exasperation. "About that, I guess."

"Were they surprised to see you?"

He said nothing and I waited, but after a moment or two, I made getting up motions myself. "I guess I will have that talk with Gorman . . ."

He put a hand up. "Wait—dammit!"

I waited.

He chewed at the inside of his lip for half a minute more, then

nodded. "All right," he said. "Yes—I mean—no. They weren't surprised. My father had been ill in bed all last week. That's why they hadn't come down for the grand opening. I'd told them I'd be coming home Friday, to—you know—celebrate a little with them after we'd had the opening."

"What a thoughtful, caring son you were, Bob."

He gave me an unhappy look.

"So," I said, stubbing my cigarette out, "how did you do it?"

He waited a moment more before answering, his face a blank mask. "I put chloral hydrate in their champagne. So they were unconscious when I . . . um . . ."

I don't know what my own face looked like at that moment, but it was hard to keep the horror I felt from creeping into it. Some of it got there because Dixon saw it and reacted angrily.

"Look," he sneered with quiet heat. "You don't know anything about it, all right? You know nothing, so . . ."

"You knocked your parents out, put them to bed, and then set fire to their house." I stared at him. "Is that what you're saying?"

He nodded. "Tell me what you want," he said with disgust.

"You were taking a chance, weren't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"They might have awakened before the fire started."

He said nothing.

"Explain it to me, Bob."

"I'd tested it," he said grudgingly. "The chloral hydrate, I mean."

"How?"

He shrugged. "On them. A couple of weeks ago. I put some in their wine at dinner. It knocked them out for ten hours, and even then I had to shake them awake."

"I see," I told him with a forced smile. "That sounds—careful."

I lit another cigarette to cover the feeling of revulsion that was working its way through me. "How did you start the fire?"

"What difference does it make?"

"Tell me!" I said, sharply enough to turn some nearby heads.

Dixon glanced around himself, then leaned forward over the table. "Keep it down, will you?"

"I'm waiting, Bob."

He sighed. "I'd . . . arranged to have the interior of the house repainted. I'd read somewhere that freshly painted walls would . . ." He shrugged. "You know? Go up fast?"

I nodded, feeling cold sweat bead on my forehead.

"After I got them to bed, I put a portable heater up next to it. I just tipped it over onto the edge of the blanket."

"That sounds chancy, too."

"I tested that out," he told me. "I went through a half dozen different blankets until I found one that would . . ." He stopped himself there because he suddenly didn't like the sound of what he was saying.

"Go up in flames?" I offered.

He said nothing.

"You *are* a careful man," I observed. "Aren't you, Bob?"

He didn't look flattered.

"What kind of timing device did you use?"

He didn't answer.

"You were in Portland when the fire started, so the heater couldn't have been on when you left, could it?"

He said nothing.

"I asked you what kind of timing device . . ."

"The computer!" he snapped.

"I got some software that I ran on my mother's PC. For turning appliances off and on. I set the computer program to turn on the heater at six thirty."

"I see."

He smiled with a hint of pride.

"So then all you had to do was drive back to Portland and wait for the call." I smiled. "Ex-

cept for a little car trouble, you had it made."

He nodded.

"You weren't very careful then, were you, Bob?"

He snorted derisively and looked away.

"Weather like this, you should have had your chains on..."

"What do you *want*?" he snapped, scowling at me.

"Take it easy, Bob," I said. "Just one more question."

His black brows came together.

"Why'd you do it?"

"Why?"

"Gorman said you carried two million in insurance on the house and contents. What was it you carried on your parents?"

"It wasn't the money!" Dixon blurted with irritation.

I let a lot of disbelief into my face. "Come on, Bob..."

"It wasn't!" he said with heated insistence. "My mother was too old for the business. She was in the way. The competition was getting cutthroat, and we had to expand or die. She opposed growth." He held a hand out to me in a what-could-I-do gesture. "I did it to save my mother's business."

"I see."

"My mother started that business," he said with some urgency. "It would have killed her to see it go down."

"I get it," I told him. "You killed your mother to save her life."

He actually started to nod agreement before he caught the irony in my voice. "You're mocking me," he said quietly.

"You're right."

His face recomposed itself then into a grim businesslike look. "All right," he said crisply. "What do you want?"

"How much insurance did you carry on the lives of your parents?"

"That's none of your business."

"I'd say it is."

"A hundred thousand..."

"Don't lie to me, Bob."

"All right!" Dixon exclaimed with sharp exasperation. "I'll pay you a quarter of a million dollars as soon as I get my money."

"For what?" I asked.

"What do you mean, 'for what'?"

"I mean, what do you think your money will buy?"

"Just—disappear," he told me. "Just..."

"Keep quiet."

"Right."

I shook my head. "It's not enough, Bob."

His face went shrewdly angry. "Half a million, then."

"No."

"For Christ' sake!"

"Take it easy, Bob."

He glared at me for a moment, then heaved a sigh and opened his mouth—about to up the ante a bit more, I suppose—when he finally got it.

His owl eyes blinked at me for a few seconds, then he leaned over, reaching across the table, turning the lapel of my jacket in such a way that the tiny microphone Gorman and his crew had fitted me with became exposed.

"Sit down, Bob," I told him. "Relax."

He didn't sit down, though. His eyes widened, and his mouth opened in surprise. "You . . ." he said breathlessly. "You . . ."

He gave me a final look of surprised horror, then walked away from me, quickly, toward the exit.

After telling Gorman that Dixon was on the move, I got up myself and watched Dixon push through the coffee shop door, hesitate on the sidewalk, then stride past the window to my left out of my line of sight, and that was it.

At least as far as I was concerned.

I took the check to the cashier and paid, but as I stood there waiting for my change, there was a shout from outside, and I saw Dixon again.

He was running now, from left to right in the middle of the iced-over street, dodging traffic directly in front of the coffee shop and headed toward the intersection. Two uniformed policemen were coming up fast behind him and then two more appeared in front, and that was when he slipped, arms flailing wildly, looking something like a panicked chicken. His legs flipped up, he let out a squawk, landed hard on his rump, and then they had him.

"Wow!" the cashier exclaimed. "What was *that* all about?"

Along with the four policemen, Gorman appeared outside looking grimly down at Dixon, who was just then being cuffed. The fireman glanced over at me through the coffee shop window and nodded.

"Jaywalker," I told the cashier as she handed me my change. "I've heard the police are cracking down."

UNSOLVED

by
Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the February issue.

The Christmas shopping season is a time when clerks are flustered and harried—an ideal time for counterfeiters and their confederates to pass “funny money.” This year, even the tiny village of Belleville was not immune. When each of the six store owners took his daily receipts to the village’s small bank, an alert teller spotted the counterfeit five dollar bills. Mr. Queen was among the victims.

Carl, one of the owners, called a meeting. Everyone attended.

“This has got to stop!” declared the owner of the hardware store. “I’m calling in federal authorities.”

Treasury agent Greg Grayson and his understudy, Walt Waller, set out from their Chicago office by car. It was late afternoon when they pulled into Belleville.

“Sure seems an unlikely place for passing bogus bills,” remarked Waller, looking over the six stores—a bakery, a clothing store, a furniture store, a grocery, a hardware store, and a restaurant—that, together with the little bank, lined Main Street. “There’s not more than maybe thirty houses in this one-horse burg.”

“The population is officially eighty-seven,” said T-man Grayson. “But Belleville draws trade from the surrounding farming community—that must be another five hundred, probably more.”

“So, not counting out-of-town strangers who might have targeted Belleville, we are faced with some six hundred suspects.”

“It was no outsider,” stated Grayson positively. “Counterfeit distributors tend to stick to the cities; besides, they’d be mighty conspicuous buying from every store here. And we can practically eliminate the farmers hereabouts. They’re too busy tending their livestock this time of year to go off to the big city to buy funny money.”

“Hey,” objected Waller, “you mean it was a local resident? Surely others would know about it.”

“Not necessarily, Walt. Remember, nothing like this has ever hit Belleville before. And since the bogus bills have turned up at all the stores, it’s someone who trades here regularly.”

“Maybe one of the merchants themselves?” suggested Waller.

“Hardly, since they have to wait on customers and tend their

businesses, particularly at this season. But one of their wives is a *strong* possibility. She could circulate and buy small items at any of the other stores and never attract attention."

"So what's the plan, boss?"

"Let's assume the passer didn't use them at her husband's store. Naturally, with money changing hands during the shopping, one or more would find their way into her husband's till. But not many. Our most logical suspect is the wife of the store owner who took the *fewest* of the false fives to the bank."

The two treasury agents met with the store owners and their wives. They were all anxious to talk.

- (1) Bert said, "I had twice the loss of the owner of the furniture store, and he had \$10 more in counterfeit bills than Hilda's husband."
- (2) Earl declared, "I had one more bogus \$5 bill than Irene's husband, and he had twice the loss of the baker."
- (3) Dan said, "As I mentioned to Mr. Maler, Mr. Piper had twice as many false bills as I got, and I had one more than Mr. Rasch."
- (4) Adam spoke up. "Mr. Maler got stuck with one more than I did, and I ended up with twice as many as Julia's husband."
- (5) Fred stated, "Laura's husband had one more bad bill than me, but I lost twice as much as Mr. Odell."
- (6) Laura's husband agreed. "Yeah, but the grocer lost twice as much as I did, poor guy."
- (7) Greta declared, "My husband took in one more of them counterfeit fives than did the owner of the clothing store."
- (8) Kathy said, "My husband had twice the loss of Mr. Nabor, who had two more of them funny bills than the restaurant owner."

"Now I can identify the likely passer," Grayson told Waller. "Let's hear what she has to say."

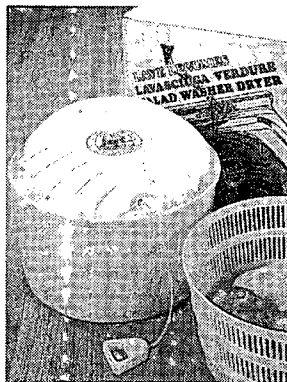
He rapped on the door of one of the houses. The housewife who opened it fidgeted nervously with the hem of her apron. "My husband ain't home," she said quickly.

"That's quite all right, ma'am; actually, it was *you* I wanted to talk to, Mrs. _____. Now, *where did you get the counterfeit money?*"

At that, _____ burst into tears. "I—I just wanted some nice things my husband couldn't afford. Please try to understand, mister," she pleaded. "I even dreamed of leaving this miserable town."

*Who is this guilty wife who passed the bogus bills in Belleville?
How many did she pass altogether?*

MAIL ★ ORDER ★ MALL

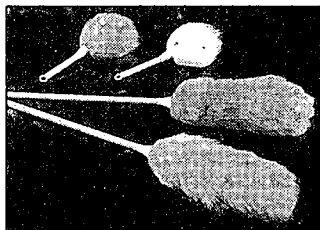


SPIN WASH, SPIN DRY

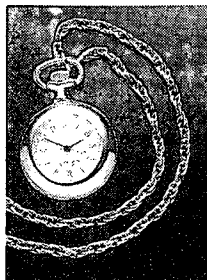
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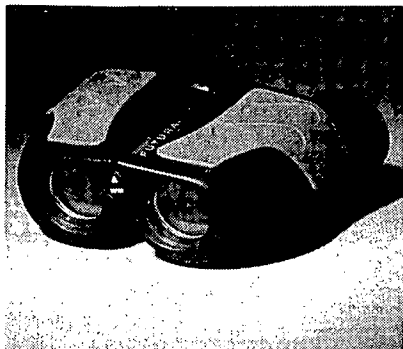


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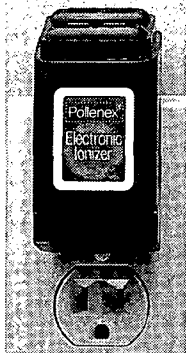
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FICTION

One More Drink for the Runway

O. S. Flanagan

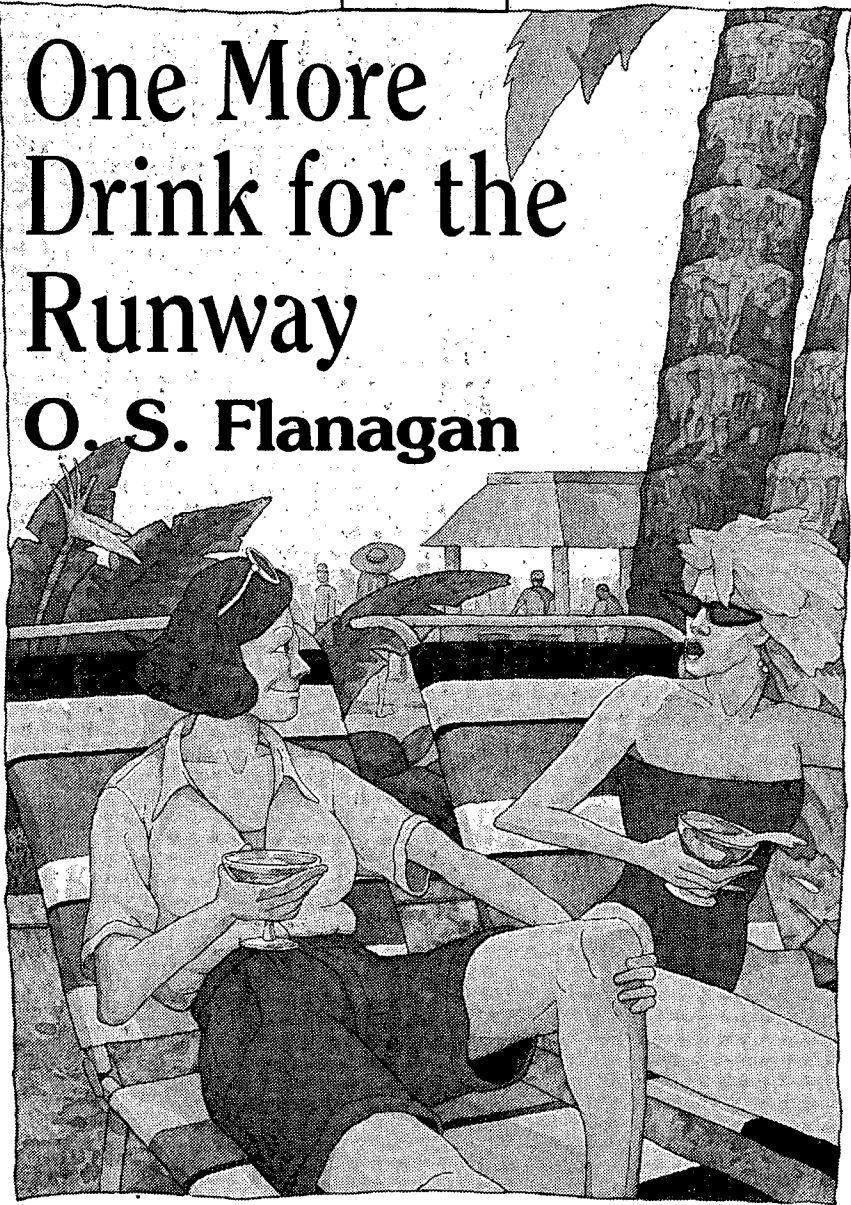


Illustration by Jim Adams

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
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When Natalie Newton telephoned for a late afternoon meeting at the offices of the Newton Group, I couldn't identify either name. Later I was amazed when, despite the passage of over twenty years, I recognized our client—my childhood friend, Noogie Newton.

I hadn't seen Noogie since junior high. Then she was the steady of a rough hunk named Grady who wore a tattoo and was the only guy in our school with chest hair. Grady inspired amazing conjecture among my giggly friends about what went on in the back seat of his '56 Chevy.

The biggest scandal that term was when Noogie's older sister suddenly decided to visit their aunt in Michigan for nine months. After that, the social worker kept a closer eye on their alcoholic stepfather. When school closed for the summer, Noogie and Grady disappeared.

Now she was standing beside an enormous teak desk, dressed in a Dior suit and decorated with a truckload of genuine jewelry. And she needed *my* help?

I've been the "and Associate" in Alma Adams and Associate for several years. Aunt Alma and I operate an investigative firm that specializes in delicate matters, many for silver-haired dowagers of Buckhead, the "old money" mecca of Atlanta.

After the usual insincerities, such as "You haven't aged a bit," we got to the reason for the meeting. (I hoped the part about my not having changed was an exaggeration, however. I was a real toad at age thirteen.)

"Callie, I own the Newton Group. We manage and lease several million square feet of commercial properties around Atlanta."

Noogie fiddled nervously with her bulky diamond ring. "I'm afraid I may be inadvertently involved in a money dry cleaning scheme."

Money *dry cleaning*? I'd heard of money laundering . . .

She didn't give me a chance to comment. "I want to hire you. I'll explain later. First you need to meet some people who are leaving on vacation this afternoon. I'll introduce you as our new landscape maintenance person."

Her gardener? I know I don't dress as well as Noogie—excuse me, Natalie—but couldn't she do better than that?

Natalie led me to a small cubicle where a conservatively dressed man in his late twenties was talking on the telephone. When he saw us, he muttered something and hung up.

"Yes, ma'am, Boss Lady. What can your best agent do for you today?"

Natalie's voice was cool. I guessed she didn't like the Boss Lady part. "Kevin Davis, this is Callie Adams. She's going to take care of the annuals on our properties."

Kevin stared at me as he shook my hand. "Don't I know you from somewhere? Maybe you did my folks' yard in Buckhead?"

I should have told Natalie not to use my real name. "No, I don't do residential work."

"Maybe it was at the Peachwood Country Club."

He wasn't going to let it go. "That's it. I've been in charge of the beds of *Atropa belladonna* bordered with *Rhus toxicodendron* for several years."

He seemed satisfied to think that I'd been paid to plant deadly nightshade surrounded by poison ivy at a golf course. I learned those names during one of our stranger cases. Actually, most of our cases are rather odd.

"Is there anything new on the Smithwickson deals?" Natalie asked.

Kevin shook his head. "When I get back, I'll worry about them. I'm going fishing," he told me. "Off Key West."

Next Natalie stopped where two women were performing major surgery on a copy machine.

"Is it broken again, Sarabeth?"

One woman nodded. "I'm glad it happened before Stephi left. She knows everything about every piece of office equipment on earth."

The other woman looked up. Stephi was small and lovely. Her long, thick hair was cut in layers, and her makeup, although demure, probably took an hour to apply. Her suit was at least as expensive as Natalie's. She agreed immodestly. "She's right, I do."

"Sarabeth Drew and Stephi Thomason, this is Callie. She's helping with our landscaping."

Stephi nodded and got off the floor. "I'd love to chat, but in fifteen minutes, I'm officially on vacation for a week and out of here."

"Good for you," I said. "Going somewhere exotic?"

She looked sideways at Natalie before answering. "Maybe, or perhaps I'm just going to hang around the pool. I'd rather our resident workaholic not know or she'll call me to make her a few more bucks."

Natalie ignored the jab. "Have you heard anything more from the Smithwickson Group?"

Who was this Smithwickson outfit?

"Nope. Maybe we've saturated the market with their leases. I'll check on them when I get back."

We walked a little farther to a small office. Inside we found a woman with her head propped on one hand. With the other she was thumbing through a checkbook.

"Martha Anderson, this is Callie."

Martha apparently wouldn't have cared if I was Janet Reno. She ignored me. "Natalie, about that advance. Did you work out anything?"

Natalie nodded. "Yes. Not what you wanted, but the best we could do."

Martha stuffed her checkbook into her purse and put on her jacket. "Thanks. I hope it's enough to get me to Ft. Lauderdale, give my boys a nice week, and pay my money-sucking ex-husband his back child support. Nice to meet you. I have a plane to catch."

Closeted in her private office, Natalie and I talked over glasses of chilled chardonnay.

"Do you remember Grady? We married and moved to Atlanta. After a couple of years, I wanted a better life. I divorced him while he was doing time at the state prison in Reidsville. I earned a high school equivalency certificate and studied real estate. Later I married a wealthy businessman whose affection for young girls surfaced shortly after the nuptials. We were sort of the Buttafuocos of Buckhead until he divorced me. Choosing male companionship is not my strong suit, but I'm catching on."

"Several months ago I was approached by a client who wanted to expand into the Atlanta market. I gave the assignment to Stephi, Kevin, and Martha. They put the Smithwickson Group into over a hundred thousand square feet of retail dry cleaning stores, wholesale plants, and office space. We did the usual background search of credit reports and checking references. They were squeaky clean. Maybe if they'd been from Bogotá, rather than Cleveland, I'd have been suspicious, but I didn't have a clue. Then suddenly I'm getting calls from irate landlords because Smithwickson has sublet all their locations to rather undesirable companies and is paying their rent in cash. When I went to refresh myself on their files, I couldn't find any paperwork."

"The Georgia Real Estate Board requires that a broker keep a copy of the lease in all transactions in which he receives a fee, and I can't reconstruct those documents. I don't know if it was the tenant or one of my people who falsified the financial reports, but now the credit bureau has no record of them. Probably their references don't exist any more, either."

"Why not tell the police about this?"

"I'm joining a group of premier local developers to take our combined assets public as a real estate investment trust, the latest Wall Street darling. If there's any hint of scandal, I'm out. Plus, if the board of realtors audits me and finds out about the missing leases, it could mean the loss of my broker's license."

"Tell me more about your agents."

"Stephi was our secretary until she got her salesman's license. Very expensive tastes. She's great at chasing a potential client until they give in. Martha lost custody of her two boys to their father, a marine biologist in Florida, because of a gambling fetish. She's always in debt up to her earrings. But she understands the business better than any of my other agents and can close a deal. Some agents let a transaction go on until it dies of natural causes. Kevin is like that. He talks a big game, has even told clients that he owns the business. I'd boot him out except he has connections with several national tenants."

"Did you question them?"

"No. None of them likes me. Successful females sometimes have a hard time being popular, and I don't want them to know how hard I worked to get here. I doubt seriously that they'd confess to save my bacon. So I figured why alert them?"

"Were these vacation trips sudden?"

"Nope. They've talked about them for weeks."

"I'll talk to Alma. Drug or mob money isn't usually our kind of work."

The next morning Natalie was at our office. She fished an envelope out of her purse. "I'm always the first in the office at nine. This was coming over the fax when I unlocked the door."

Inside the envelope was a sheet of slimy thermal paper.

(305) 555-4242 Tuesday 7:58 a.m. We have what you need. Send \$25,000 cash to each of us at our home addresses by Express Mail. You must send it TODAY. If it doesn't arrive on Thursday morning, we'll inform the police. Kevin, Martha, and Stephi.

Well, no need to waste any more time sorting out which agent was guilty. They all did it.

Alma returned to the office at noon. After introductions and a quick update, Alma leaned back in her chair. "That's a south Florida area code. Do you have any clients in that vicinity?"

Natalie thought for a moment. "Yes. Kevin represents MailDrop, one of those full service mailbox services. He got his friend Frank a franchise in Key West."

Alma obtained the telephone number from information. "Yes, I'm opening a local office and may use your services until we're permanently located. Would you fax me your rates? Thanks."

In a matter of minutes, we watched the transmission arrive.
(305) 555-4242 Tuesday 12:17 p.m. Our rates are as follows: for one month . . .

Alma ignored the rest of the message. "Natalie, don't send that money. We'll deliver it in person. Callie will take care of it."

I would?

"She knows where not to go."

I did?

After Natalie left, Alma reviewed my notes. "Why is it going to take two days for Express Mail? I don't have much faith in the postal service, but isn't this a little pessimistic?"

"Maybe one is going to collect all the mail and fly down to split with the others."

Alma shook her head. "I wouldn't think one would volunteer to wait behind. What if Natalie told the police? And why would the others trust the courier to show up with the payoff?"

She studied the message Natalie left with us and rechecked her watch. "You see the problem with the fax, don't you?"

I nodded. "Yep. I do now."

After Alma and I discussed a few plans, I left to visit the travel agent employed by Natalie's firm. A congenial woman with the largest bouffant hairdo I've seen in decades checked through her files for me.

Big Hair finally located the itineraries. "Kevin and Martha both arrived in Florida yesterday. I have no local address for either. I didn't make any reservations for Stephi."

Next I went to the home of each suspect to be sure they weren't sitting there waiting for the postman's ring. Stephi lived in an

upscale singles apartment complex on the Chattahoochee River. Kevin had an expensive condo in Buckhead, and Martha lived in a dilapidated frame house in Marietta, an Atlanta suburb. All three residences appeared unoccupied.

While I was in the vicinity of each dwelling, I visited the post office servicing that zip code. Luckily I wasn't in a hurry. Those folks are mighty slow.

It was a long shot, but after paying the required three dollars at each branch, I received the forwarding addresses filed by each of our suspects. (People need to remember that if they submit those forms so Ed McMahon or the Prize Patrol can find them with that winning magazine purchase, anyone else can find them, too.)

The first strange thing was that most people don't forward their mail while on a short vacation but all our suspects had filed the necessary forms. It explained the two day delivery on the Express Mail. I learned that if there were multiple forwardings one should add a day's delay for each forward notice. Since the money was expected on Thursday, only one day late, that meant these new addresses were probably the final destination.

The other unique feature was that all three had forwarded their mail to a hotel on Grand Cayman Island—care of Stephi Thomason.

My next stop was an office supply house where I learned more than I ever wanted to know about fax machines.

Then I called Alma. "I think Stephi is in it alone. She could be on Grand Cayman. You were right. That fax didn't have to come from Key West or any other place in Florida. It was probably just to frame the other two."

Alma consulted a travel book before she agreed. "The Caymans don't use Daylight Savings Time. Have a nice trip."

On Wednesday morning a brutally early flight got me to Miami in time to catch a direct flight into George Town on Grand Cayman. After a terrifying cab ride on the left side of the roads, I arrived at the luxury hotel on Seven Mile Beach where Stephi was presumably exiled and where I checked into a room that overlooked a lush courtyard. I sat on my terrace for a while and rested in the warm, fragrant air while I decided where to look. The pool bar was a good guess.

Stephi was stretched out on a chaise with a thick novel and a tropical cocktail. I decided to get in the swing of things with a Long Island Iced Tea. I normally don't drink such potent stuff, which, for the uninitiated, isn't exactly mother's milk. It includes rum, gin, vodka, Triple Sec, sweet and sour mix, and a little cola. And a wedge of lime. No tea. A few of those and I would have missed the next week. I flopped into a neighboring lounge chair.

I opted to not beat around the bush. I painted on my best gotcha grin. "Okay, Stephi, where are the files?"

I swear the woman almost choked on the little umbrella in her Mai-Tai. "Who the hell are you?" She raised her sunglasses. "Aren't you the gardener?"

"Nope. Natalie sent me to deliver the money and get the files."

"She was supposed to mail it."

"I know this may be hard to believe, but she didn't trust you to keep your end of the deal. She thought you might pocket the money and destroy the evidence."

Stephi studied me for a moment. "How did you find me?"

"Two things. I suspect you rented a fax machine here to send that message. Natalie said you're a whiz at office machines, so you knew that you could set the sending telephone number and time to whatever you wanted. You changed the area code to south Florida to implicate your friends. But you didn't change the time because you forgot that although Florida, Cayman, and Atlanta are all in Eastern Standard Time, Cayman alone doesn't recognize Daylight Savings Time. So when Natalie received the fax in Atlanta at nine o'clock, despite the almost instantaneous transmission, it was marked an hour earlier. We checked with Frank's MailDrop, whose telephone number you probably got from their lease file, and their time stamp is set correctly.

"Then there was the delay in the Express Mail delivery. We knew there had to be a reason why you didn't expect to receive the money until tomorrow. Filing those phony change of address notices was the clincher."

Stephi sucked on her cocktail. "Well, maybe I'll do without the money. I don't need it. I'll drop a note to the police and disappear."

What a sweetheart. "Ms. Newton is still willing to pay you for the files."

Stephi stood up and threw back the last of her drink. "Nope. I already have a lot of money, and where I'm going, I can live cheap."

I watched the drunken little entrepreneur weave across the courtyard. Apparently that hadn't been her first cocktail.

I was tired, but I walked over to Hemingway's, a restaurant on the beach, where I enjoyed a dinner of conch chowder, salad, and crabcakes while the sun set over the horizon. In the pool outside the restaurant, future scuba guides were getting a crash course in aquatic tourist management. I had a weak moment and wished this was a vacation. Then I remembered my client and worried about how I was going to gain access to Stephi's hotel room. I can pick most locks, but I never do it on foreign soil. Callie's Rule.

I'd signed my bill when I saw Stephi unsteadily making her way across the room to my table. She was soused.

She dropped into the vacant chair. "Wha's your name again?" Apparently she was past enunciating all her letters. *T* turned out to be a particularly elusive consonant.

"Callie."

"Okay, Callie, le's talk. Maybe I can use the money. Sevenny-five thousand dollars is too much to leave behind. Tomorrow. Before I catch my plane. Okay?"

Now that I'd met the enemy, so to speak, I had an idea.

"When are you leaving? I hope it's not on one of those puddle jumpers because they're not reliable."

She snagged a waiter and had another drink on my tab before I could stop her. I'd have hated to be her liver. "Nope. I'm taking a commercial flight to Montego Bay." She pulled an airline ticket folder from her purse and waved it under my nose. The same international carrier on which I was booked to return to Miami. "Then another flight from there to somewhere else and so on. I've read *The Client* and *The Pelican Brief*. I know how to disappear without a trail."

I doubted John Grisham would've been pleased to know he was Stephi's travel advisor. "Okay, Stephi, I'll get the cash. I admire you having the guts to do this. But how'd you get so much money?"

One insincere compliment opened the floodgates. "On the leases I lis'ed co-brokers that didn't exiss. Since I helped with the paper trail, the Smithwickson Company paid that money to me. An extra four bucks per square foot on a hundred thousand feet. Tax free."

Later we walked (one of us staggered) back to the hotel and bade each other goodnight. We agreed to meet the next morning at eleven by the pool.

Her last words to me were, "I've got nothing to lose. Don't show and I'm out a little money, but your client is in jail. And don't screw with me or I'll waltz through the airport and leave you hanging."

By the appointed hour I'd already been into George Town. After telephone calls to Alma and Natalie, I went to a bank where Natalie wired twenty-three hundred dollars. I found it amazing that in a country of approximately twenty thousand people, where locals lined up in the town square to use one of the four public pay telephones, there were over five hundred banks. I got the money in fifteen banded packets of a hundred dollars each and the rest in loose fifties. In the cab I slipped a fifty on the top of each packet. Then I had the driver stop at a convenience store where I purchased two plastic water bottles.

When Stephi arrived at the pool, she was in a black mood. Probably a touch of well-deserved hangover. I bought her a bloody Mary and gave her a quick peek at the money packed into a briefcase. "Why don't we share a taxi to the airport? Our flights leave about the same time. We can swap the money and files there."

Apparently Stephi was feeling pretty low. She was easy.

"Sure."

Did I mention that, for a healthy tip, the hotel bartender had filled one of those plastic containers with Long Island Iced Tea and the other with water? I was careful not to get the two confused.

I packed Stephi into the cab. While she was cuddling the container filled with alcohol, I sucked greedily on the ice water. It was cruel, I know, but business is business. Alma's Rule.

Stephi could still walk when we went through customs, but at the gate she was woozy enough to be thrilled when I offered to help her check in at the counter.

Did I also mention that I'd purchased a second ticket to Miami while I was in George Town?

Yep, when they called the flights to Miami and Montego Bay, I steered my companion into Gate B instead of A. Even sober, it was hard to tell the difference. The doors were ten feet apart and opened into the same area where everyone dashed to their planes.

On board, I slapped headphones on Stephi so she'd miss the departure information. After we were airborne, I showed the flight attendant my investigator's license, and the captain radioed Miami to have the authorities meet us at the gate. Then I sat back and

watched Stephi's complexion turn from splotchy cherry to pasty white. I was afraid she might sober up after she tossed her cookies into the little bag, but thankfully she was too tired and sweaty to ask any questions.

Later, when she was holding her head in a wet towel, she missed the announcement that we were on our final approach into Miami. I might have felt bad about the trickery, or at least about making her nauseated, except that as the plane hit the tarmac Stephi rallied and became the little bitch she'd been before. "You're flying to Florida by way of Montego Bay? Are you having a little extra fun at Natalie's expense? Like me?"

Her fun ended when she was arrested at the end of the jet way.

I shouldn't admit to a lack of faith in a client, but I checked those files to be sure that Natalie wasn't involved in the money laundering. The files were intact, and the forgeries and documents were apparently Stephi's doing.

After I returned to Atlanta, Natalie came by the office to pick up the documents and give us a generous check for our services.

"Natalie, I admire what you've done with your life."

"Thanks. I appreciate what you did for me."

I didn't know what else to say so I just ducked my head.

She picked up her purse. "By the way, Grady telephoned me to say he's out on parole again. I told him you asked about him. He remembered you. Said he might give you a call."

She flashed me a big smile on her way out the door.

Surely she was kidding.

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FICTION

Christmas Ice

Kenneth Gavrell

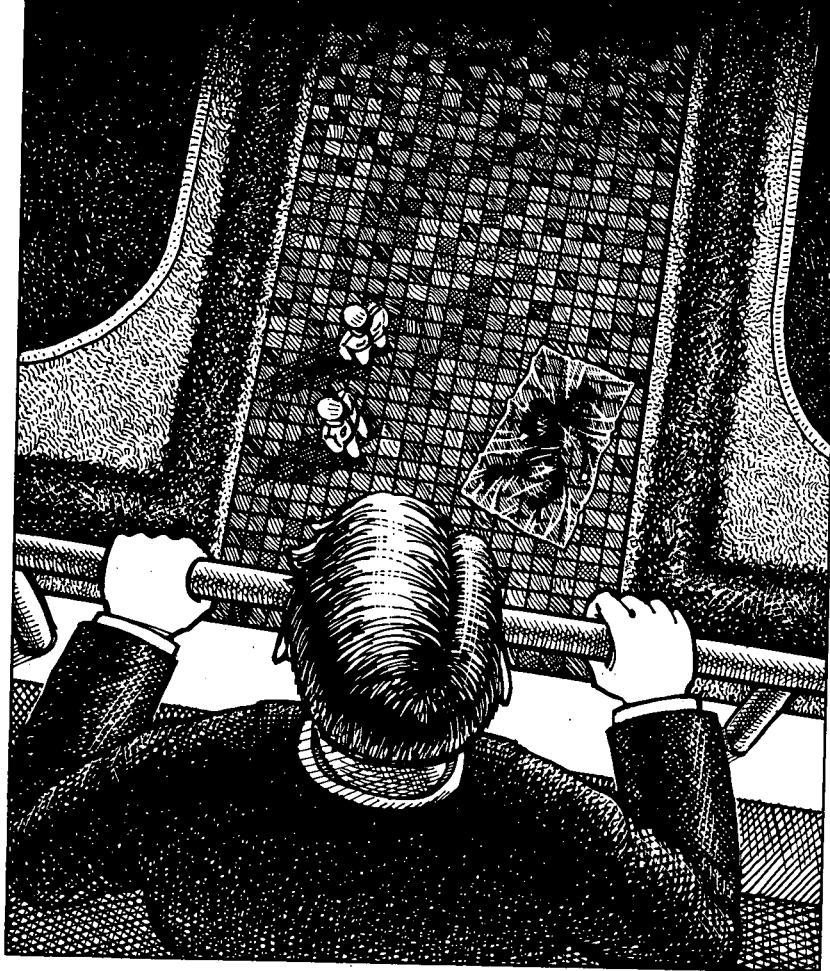


Illustration by Steve Chalker

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I was nursing a black eye and was counting myself lucky that it wasn't a closed eye. The organ in question had bloomed ripe red on the day after it ran into a flawless fist and was now turning mustard yellow. Given these colors, I wondered why they referred to it as a black eye.

The pain had pretty much gone by now, except for an area of my upper right jaw. I'd been soothing it with loving care and white rum. I'd lost the fight, but I'd won on the case. There was two thousand dollars in my underfed bank account that hadn't been there before the black eye.

But life was getting boring hanging around the apartment and waiting for the phone to ring. Maria called from the office regularly, but not with any new cases. The *Navidades* drums.

Nothing much gets done in Puerto Rico during the Christmas holidays, which is to say between early December and mid-January. It's not a time to start any kind of project that involves having people show up for work. A friend of mine had hired two guys to build him a toolshed in his back yard; one had disappeared after a week, the second followed a few days later.

Navidades is a time for parties, serious drinking, fierce driving, traffic jams, and shopping malls so stuffed you couldn't squeeze in a moped. We know how to holiday in San Juan.

But nursing a hurt head wasn't holidaying, no matter how you looked at it, so I was grateful when the phone sounded. It was Maria again.

"*Qué tal*, chief? How's the shiner?"

"Hi, Maria. No more black eye jokes, please. I'm not in the mood."

"Well, I've got something to perk up your spirits. A new case."

"I'm feeling better already. What kind of case?"

"She didn't say. Her name's Lourdes Delgado. A señorita. She gave me her phone number."

I jotted down the number Maria dictated.

"She says she'll be there until noon," Maria said. "Sounds young. Who knows, maybe you'll get lucky."

"Cheap shots don't become you, Maria."

"You coming in today, boss?"

"Is there some good reason for me to?"

"No, I just miss your handsome face."

"I'll call up this Señorita Delgado. If it sounds promising, I'll go talk to her."

"Está bien, jefe," Maria said. She snapped her gum by way of goodbye.

A secretary who chews gum doesn't lend a whole lot of dignity to an office. On the other hand, I'm a creature of habit, and Maria had been with me a long time. I dialed the Delgado number.

She answered herself. A pleasant, intelligent sounding voice.

"I'm Carlos Bannon, the investigator."

"That was a prompt response, Sr. Bannon."

"My secretary knew where to reach me."

"I'd like to talk with you in person."

"What kind of case is it?" I asked.

"I suppose you'd call it a missing person."

"Where did you get my name?" I asked.

"I don't know anyone who's ever hired a private detective. I chose you in the phone book because you're close to my office and because your name intrigued me."

"I'm half gringo."

"I figured. Can we meet for lunch?"

"Where are you located?"

"In the Avery Building, ground floor. The Laguna Real Estate Agency."

It was about three blocks east of my office on Ashford Avenue. "There's a Mexican place in the same block," I suggested, "La Concha Rosa. Is that okay?"

"I eat there all the time," Srta. Delgado said. "It's fine."

"Twelve thirty," I suggested.

"Fine," she said, "I'll be wearing a yellow dress," and hung up.

I shed my comfortable old robe and sandals, showered, dressed, and covered the red and yellow eye with sunglasses. I took the elevator down to my new Toyota and gunned her out of the parking lot in the direction of the Condado.

I actually felt good.

It was fortunate that La Concha Rosa's food was appetizing because the decor made me want to vomit. Everything was in shades of pink, even the waiters. It had been one of Raquel's favorite restaurants.

The place was crowded, but there was only one woman sitting alone in a yellow dress at a table by the window. I take that back: she was a woman and a half in the very best sense. My hormones started bouncing around like ping-pong balls in a lottery machine.

"Sr. Bannon," she said as I walked up. She smiled—a daz-

zling smile in a classic face, tan complexion, light brown eyes, dark hair. Early thirties?

"Do you always size women up so obviously?" she asked. I couldn't tell if she was offended.

"Your English is very good," I said.

"It's helpful in real estate."

Raquel had hated yellow, said it made her look sallow, but Lourdes Delgado looked like a birthday cake in the color. I was hungry.

"Sit down," she offered.

I sat down and fumbled with the menu.

"Shall we order first and talk later?" she suggested.

I said that seemed a suitable schedule of events. While we waited for the food, she told her story.

Her father, Jorge Delgado, a man of fifty-five, had disappeared three days ago. Simply vanished with no explanation, his car still in his condo parking garage. Since he was well-off—an executive director at Holloway Electronics—she had at first supposed kidnapping. But no demand for ransom had come, and by now she assumed there wouldn't be one. She had, of course, informed the police, who had checked the hospitals, the airport, even the cruise lines, but they'd come up with

nothing. She was at her wit's end.

"It seems to me that your father may have vanished of his own accord," I said when she paused in her recital.

"For what reason?" she asked.

"Personal problems? Money problems? Is mental—disorientation a possibility?"

"As far as I know, my father has no personal problems. Since my mother's death four years ago, he's lived very quietly. He doesn't seem to mind being alone as much as I'd expected."

"You don't live with him, then."

"No. I married right after college. Since then," she added, "I've been divorced."

"Haven't we all."

"It seems that way," she agreed.

"Could your father have had financial problems or some problem where he works?"

"I doubt it. He's really quite well-off. And there are only two people above him at Holloway."

"So, as you see it, your father had no reason to disappear and apparently wasn't kidnapped, since no demand for money has been made. He doesn't seem to have met with an accident, or the police would have located him. Where does that leave us?"

"That is why I called you in," Lourdes Delgado said. "Answering questions like that is presumably your business."

"Where does your father live?"

She gave me the address—a very exclusive condo only a few blocks away in the Condado. The kind of place where even the super looks classier than you. I also jotted down her office and home phone numbers. "Did you bring a photo of your father?" I asked.

She had, of course. No dumbbell she. The man smiling at the lens looked hale and hardy for his age, hair going grey, body trim, a cigarette held casually between the fingers.

"He likes that picture," she said.

"He looks very good for his age."

"Yes. He hasn't any health problems, either," she said. "At least, none that I know of. What happened to your eye?"

"I ran into a hostile fist on my last case."

"I hope nothing like that happens on this one," she said.

Our food arrived. Lourdes Delgado attacked her burritos with healthy zest.

"I'll be glad to look into it," I said. "I'll talk to your father's neighbors, the people at Holloway Electronics. Try to pick

up his trail. You said he disappeared at night?"

"I presume so. I called him at six thirty or so in the evening. He was making himself dinner. He likes to cook."

"He sounded all right?" I interrupted.

"As far as I could tell," she said. "He never arrived at the company the next morning."

"I imagine his condominium has very good security."

"Normal—for San Juan," Lourdes Delgado said.

"Which means pretty extensive." I took a sip of my beer, ate some refried beans, and told her my normal fees. She said they were fine. I said I'd keep her up to date on anything I learned.

"I can imagine how worried you are," I said.

"Yes," she said. "No. Oh, I don't know. It's just that Papi is normally so in control of things. I can't yet believe something like this has really happened to him."

Through the rest of the meal I plied her with further questions about her father, but nothing she said appeared to contribute towards an explanation of his disappearance. She *was* very much upset, as anybody would be under the circumstances. But she, too, had magnificent control. Style. I

was sorry when our lunch came to a close.

El Cisne, a tall, white and cerulean structure, glittered in the afternoon sunshine. It seemed to sail proudly against the blue sky behind it. I rang the buzzer labeled ADMINISTRACIÓN. There was an answering buzz, and I walked through as a door opened on the left side of the lobby. A man emerged who looked me over inquiringly; he was tall and dark-skinned and looked competent. To simplify matters I pulled out my P.I. license and told him that Sr. Delgado's daughter had hired me. He said he was Juan Pabón, the building's administrator.

"Supongo que tu sabes que Sr. Delgado ha desaparecido, Sr. Pabón," I said. I suppose you know that Sr. Delgado has disappeared.

"Yes. His daughter was asking me questions about him. Also a policeman was here."

"When was the last time you saw him?"

"Sunday—the day he is supposed to have disappeared. He was on his way to the supermarket."

"Did you notice anything unusual about him at that time?"

"No, nada." He gestured toward the office behind him. *"Quiere entrar y sentarse?"*

Would you like to come in and sit down?

"Not unless you have anything to tell me that might help with my investigation."

"Ah, I fear not," Pabón said. "I didn't know Sr. Delgado very well. He only spoke to me when he had a problem."

"Did he seem to you like the kind of person who might purposely vanish one day?"

"Few of us are what we seem," said Juan Pabón philosophically.

"Se puede hablar con los vecinos de Sr. Delgado?" I asked. Could I talk to Sr. Delgado's neighbors?

"There are four apartments to a floor. Sr. Delgado is in 1002. There should be someone at home in the other three at this hour."

"You know your building very well."

He smiled. "After a while you have a pretty good idea of people's daily routines. In 1001 are the Schlitzes, *norteamericanos*. He works for IBM, but his wife should be home. In 1003 is Sr. Ferrer, a psychotherapist; he has an office in his apartment. In 1004 are the Bunuels. He is a medical doctor, but his wife is also home, I believe."

"Were any of them close to Sr. Delgado?" I asked.

"I couldn't say."

"You've been very helpful."

"You can't get on the floor unless they call the elevator," Pabón said. "We have good security here."

He walked over to his desk, looked through a list of numbers, and telephoned apartment 1001. I heard him telling Mrs. Schlitz who I was and why I was there.

"She's going to push the elevator button," Pabón said. "Just get in and wait."

I did as instructed. It took her a while to push the button. Inside the elevator there were circular keyholes lined up next to the floor numbers instead of buttons. If someone had kidnapped Sr. Delgado from this building, they hadn't had an easy time of it.

A woman was standing next to an open door to my right as I left the elevator. She introduced herself—"The same as the beer," she joked.

I laughed dutifully. "Any relation?" I asked.

"Unfortunately not."

"Have the police talked to you about Sr. Delgado's disappearance?" I asked.

"No. I wasn't at home when they came. In fact, I'm supposed to be going out now to a fashion show at the Dorado Beach Hotel."

She was about fifty, well-dressed in a long skirt and frilly blouse. Her face seemed

frozen in a warm, friendly smile. Behind her I saw a thick-rugged corridor leading into a nicely furnished living room.

"How can I help you, Mr. . . . ?"

"Bannon."

"You are American?"

"My father was."

Frozen smile. "It's so dreadful about Mr. Delgado."

"Were you home on Sunday night when Sr. Delgado seems to have disappeared?"

"Yes. All night."

"Did you happen to hear him go out?"

"No."

"What do you suppose happened to him?" I asked.

"Well, since he's been missing three days," she said, "I would suppose he met with foul play."

It sounded as if she read Dorothy Sayers.

"There's so much crime about," she said. "Especially here in the Condado area."

"The police have checked the hospitals," I said. "They haven't found Sr. Delgado."

"Why, if he were . . ." she left the indelicate clause hanging, "the body might never be found. They never found Jimmy Hoffa."

"That's true," I said, "but why would someone want to do away with Sr. Delgado?"

Now I was sounding like Dorothy Sayers.

"I have no idea." She was actually whispering now. "He seemed perfectly normal."

"Did you see him at all on Sunday?" I asked.

"No," she said. "He wasn't around very much, except in the evenings."

"Do you think he could have been taken from his apartment?" I asked her.

She literally shuddered at the idea.

"Goodness, no," she said. "How could that happen?"

I saw that I was wasting my time; Mrs. Schlitz was talking to me mainly to feed her own morbid curiosity.

"Well, I'd better let you go to your fashion show, Mrs. Schlitz. Would you know if Sr. Ferrer is home?"

"No, he's not," she said with assurance. "I heard him go out about half an hour ago."

"He's unmarried?"

"Yes," she said, but in an odd way that seemed to imply a question.

"What about the Bunuels?" I asked.

"Oh, Eva is home. Let me introduce you." She angled across the hall to 1004 and rang the doorbell. "Eva, it's Cathy," she called. I heard very muffled footsteps and the rattling of chains, and then the door

opened to reveal a woman slightly older than Mrs. Schlitz with too-black hair and a face that looked worn by long worry. Her eyes were watery grey, her skin surprisingly pale for Puerto Rico. She was wearing a black skirt and a loose, light cotton sweater.

Mrs. Schlitz identified me and explained my errand. Instead of going to her fashion show or returning to her apartment, she stood and watched us.

Sra. Bunuel summed up Jorge Delgado's disappearance as "something like you'd read in a novel."

"What do you think happened to him?" I asked.

"I haven't the faintest idea. He seemed a very nice man. Very businesslike. Fond of his daughter. Some people have more luck with their children than others."

I wondered from what recesses of her cranium that remark came.

"Do you have children?" I asked.

"Oh, they're both quite grown. They live in the States. That's why I've had time to return to school. I'm studying for my master's degree in literature," she said with pride. "I'm writing a thesis on D. H. Lawrence."

"Is that right," I said. "I was an English major in college myself."

"What a strange preparation for a private detective," Sra. Bunuel said, then added, "or perhaps not."

"I became involved in criminal investigations in the army later," I explained. "But we're getting off the subject. Were you at home the night Sr. Delgado disappeared?"

"Not until midnight. My husband and I went to an art exposition in Old San Juan. It was very good."

"You didn't hear Sr. Delgado go out late at night?"

"I seldom notice when people go in and out."

"Well, did you notice *anything* that might contribute to explaining his disappearance?"

"I'm sorry. I can't help you, Sr. Bannon." She turned to the still listening Mrs. Schlitz. "Were you able to help, Cathy?"

Mrs. Schlitz dolefully admitted that she wasn't. I wished both of them a *Feliz Navidad* and said I'd probably return to talk to Sr. Ferrer.

I was able to get down to the lobby without an elevator key. Juan Pabón's office door was closed, and I didn't see him around. It was a little after three o'clock. I drove down Ashford to my office and let myself

in; Maria only worked mornings. On my desk I found two reports on recent cases that she'd typed up. I read them over and found them error-free as usual. It was amazing how well Maria could read my scrawl. I was about to take a slug from the office bottle, then thought better of it and picked up the telephone instead. Lourdes Delgado answered on the second ring.

"This is Carlos Bannon again."

"Have you learned anything?" she asked anxiously.

"No. I just have a couple more questions. I presume you went to your father's apartment after he disappeared. How did you get in?"

"I have his extra set of keys. He's already locked himself out twice."

"So you were the first one in."

"Yes. No one else has keys."

"How was the door locked?"

"Just the bottom lock, which catches automatically when you close the door. The top, a dead bolt, was unlocked."

"Is that how he usually left the door?"

"When he was inside. When he went out, he usually locked both."

"Did you notice anything out of the ordinary in the apartment? Signs of a struggle, for example?"

"No. It looked just as always."

"Who are your father's intimates, his close friends?"

"Father has no 'intimates.' He's kept more and more to himself as he's got older. I guess the two men nearest to him are Matthew Stegner and Luis Cordero at Holloway."

"No lady in your father's life?"

"Not since Mother died," Lourdes Delgado said. "He's really led a very quiet life."

I said I'd keep in touch and hung up. I found the address of Holloway Electronics in the telephone book. They were way out past Carolina, an unrewarding drive at this time of the day when the San Juan rush hour—a euphemism for three hours of hell—was just beginning. I decided to leave it till morning.

There was no hurry. I figured at this rate I'd have the case solved in nine or ten years.

The sun was shining gloriously as I threaded my way through the busy traffic to Carolina. We'd had a streak of very good December weather: clear and, for us, cool—which meant temperatures in the low sixties. The car radio was belting out something "new and hot." I

searched in vain for something old and cool.

It was ten fifteen when I saw the complex of silvery buildings that was Holloway Electronics. I knew very little about the company except that it was quite successful, connected with computers, and did some work under contract to the federal government. That stuff got into the *San Juan Star*.

A uniformed guard at the gate gave me a hard time until I convinced him that I represented Jorge Delgado's daughter. Then he had me chaperoned into an office of what looked like the main building. A secretary behind an imposing desk interviewed me there.

"May I see your license, please?"

I showed it to her. She truly studied it, and me.

"You say you represent Srta. Delgado."

"You can telephone her if you wish. I have her business number."

She handed me back my license, holding it by the tips of her fingers. They were long, slender, well-manicured fingers. The same adjectives could have described all of her. She was about forty and wore tightly tailored jade green, which didn't suit her figure.

"The gentlemen you wish to speak to are the two most im-

portant gentlemen in the company."

"The gentleman whose daughter I represent is also one of the most important in the company."

She nodded in agreement. "Have a seat," she said.

The place was full of comfortable looking easy chairs; I selected one that matched my shoes. The jade statue disappeared through a door behind her big desk. I waited, and waited some more. The place was as quiet as a funeral chapel. I felt as if I were being monitored through some secret aperture. There were no cameras that I could spot, but the pictures on the walls could have hidden a multitude of sins. Eventually the door reopened and Miss Warmth of Puerto Rico told me I should follow her.

I trailed her faint, musky perfume down a hall, around a corner, and into another, larger office with a grander desk and paintings of epic dimensions. Behind the desk sat a short, wide man in a blue-grey suit. He was about my age and starting to bald. As we came in, he raised his eyes from a sheaf of papers, lifted himself from his chair, and, surprisingly, held out his hand.

"I'm Matthew Stegner."

I shook the hand and gave him my name.

"Miss Mármol tells me that you've been hired by Jorge's daughter to investigate his disappearance. An absolutely incredible thing. Tell me, how can I help you?"

He waved me into an easy chair and resumed his own seat.

"I was wondering if something connected with his work might explain Sr. Delgado's sudden disappearance."

"If you mean is he on some top secret assignment for us, the answer is no," Stegner half smiled. "We're into computers, not cloak and dagger."

"Sr. Delgado's daughter says that he was not involved with any woman. So far as you know, is that true?"

"So far as I know, absolutely."

"Would he have any bad habits? Horseracing, for example?"

"I'd doubt it," Stegner said.

"What about any connections some people might consider 'unsavory'?"

"You really don't know the man you are pursuing, Mr. Bannon. Jorge isn't that type at all. A homebody. Married for almost thirty years before his wife died. For God's sake, he likes to cook!"

"What about debts?" I persisted.

"That I couldn't say. We all of us have financial complications in our bracket."

"Well, that at least is a problem I'll never experience," I said.

He laughed. I laughed. Another well-dressed man entered the room. He was a little younger than Stegner and clearly a Latin. Mr. Stegner introduced him as Luis Cordero. We also shook hands.

Mr. Stegner summarized my "interrogation" thus far. When he paused, Luis Cordero said: "The most likely explanation is a mugging, a carjacking—something of that sort."

"That's the worst possible scenario, but perhaps the most likely," I agreed. "Still—no body has been found as yet, and Sr. Delgado's car was left in his parking garage under his building."

"I know that Jorge liked to walk in the Condado," Luis Cordero said. "He wasn't deterred by the fact that it's a high crime area." He fingered his greying mustache thoughtfully. "I don't see any other explanation."

"Sr. Delgado hadn't behaved any differently lately?" I asked. "As if something was worrying him, for example?"

They both hesitated at that question, then Stegner shook his head. "I don't think so."

"He *did* seem a little more—preoccupied than usual to me," Luis Cordero said.

"Perhaps," Matthew Stegner agreed grudgingly. "But all of us have personal problems. And our moods."

"Do you think we will find Sr. Delgado?" I asked them.

"Of course," Matthew Stegner said. "He can't disappear indefinitely."

"I agree," said Cordero. "Jorge will show up and the 'mystery' will be solved. I only hope he will be all right."

It went on like this for a few more minutes. I asked them if there was someone else at Hol-loway who might be closer to Sr. Delgado than they. They said no—they were as close to him as anyone. I thanked them for their valuable time, and Stegner called in another employee to show me out to my car. He was a trim young man whose suit jacket curved flatteringly over a well-muscled torso. He looked more like a bodyguard or a bouncer than a businessman. But he was very polite, even to the point of watching that I drove off the premises safely.

At two o'clock that very afternoon, Jorge Delgado reappeared. I learned of this by way of a phone call from his daughter. He'd resurfaced at Hol-

loway in Stegner's office with a confession of massive misappropriation of the company's monies. He was confessing now, he said, because he'd learned of an imminent federal investigation of the company's financial records. This he hadn't expected, and the time he'd needed to cover his tracks thoroughly simply wasn't there.

Apparently Stegner listened to all this with amazement.

When asked where he'd been for almost four days, Delgado said he'd wanted time to think, "to sort things out," so he had booked himself into a hotel on the south shore. How had he gotten there?—his car was still at his condo. He'd taken a taxi.

He would be in his apartment when they wanted him. With that he'd walked out, and Matthew Stegner had telephoned Lourdes with the black news.

You can imagine how she sounded as she recited all this to me over the line. If she wasn't crying, she was close to it. She had been to her father's apartment, and he had repeated exactly what Stegner had said. He'd confessed it all. It was awful, she said; he looked "crushed, small." She had talked to him for more than two hours before calling me.

"Where are you calling from?" I asked.

"My own apartment. To tell you the truth, I forgot all about you until now."

"That's understandable."

"I can't believe it," she said.

"Stranger things have happened," I said. "I don't mean to sound callous."

"What's the worst that can happen?" she asked me.

"Some years in prison. It sounds like he might have misappropriated government contract money."

"God," Lourdes Delgado said.

"I'm sorry. When a case is resolved this way, I almost wish it hadn't been resolved at all."

She said a weary, unhappy goodnight, and I returned it. I walked out on my balcony and reflected on the myriad faces of pain. I once worked a case involving a hopeless drug addict. I'd asked him if he wasn't afraid of killing himself with the stuff, and he'd replied that he wasn't as afraid of dying as he was of living. When I asked him how he'd got started, he said, "It was so wonderful being relieved from caring."

I'd often wondered exactly how he'd defined "caring."

The phone woke me in the morning with the news of Jorge Delgado's suicide. It was his

daughter again, and if she had sounded miserable the previous evening, that was an enviable state compared to the way she sounded now. Her father had apparently jumped from his tenth floor balcony to the pavement below. She begged me to come to his condominium as soon as I could.

I was there in thirty minutes. The body was still where it had fallen, covered with a plastic sheet. Lourdes Delgado was crying. Two homicide detectives and their crew were on the scene. I'd met one of them with Moisés Romero on a previous case. His name was Santiago, a tall, morose-looking stringbean of a cop. He nodded recognition and watched as I talked to Srta. Delgado.

She was shaking her head in a gesture of denial. "How could he do it? How *could* he? It's as if I didn't know him."

I wanted to put my arm around her shoulders but felt it might be presumptuous. All I could do was make comforting noises. That was what I was there for.

"He couldn't face the scandal," she said. "It wasn't the prison, it was the shame."

I mumbled agreement and stayed with her some minutes more, letting her get it out, before I moved in the direction of Santiago and asked if he'd let

me look at Jorge Delgado's apartment. He asked why. I explained that I had been investigating Delgado's disappearance, and frankly I was curious. Santiago allowed that he didn't see how it could hurt anything if I went upstairs—he'd go with me.

I told Lourdes Delgado I'd be away for a few minutes and followed the tall detective into the building. He'd already had Pabón, the administrator, unlock the elevator for the tenth floor. There were three cops puttering around in the apartment. Santiago bummed a cigarette off one of them. The place was bright and spacious with sliding glass doors that afforded an unobstructed view of the ocean. The furniture and rugs were in those light pastel shades that are named after ice cream flavors and sunrises (it had taken me weeks to figure out what taupe was). The pictures on the walls were in closely matching tones. It looked like an apartment decorated by a woman, for instance Lourdes Delgado.

There were two bedrooms, both with glass doors to the balcony, two baths, and a good-sized study with a Macintosh PC in a custom-built redwood wall unit. A matching bookcase against the opposite wall contained a plethora of books on

computers and electronics—and a few detective novels in a lower corner. It was a study that got used, judging from the papers, journals, ballpoints, and other paraphernalia scattered around.

I returned to the living room and walked out the sliding doors onto the long balcony. Santiago was right behind me, making sure I didn't touch anything.

The condo faced a quiet, dead-end street two blocks south of Ashford. I was looking down on a wide, red-tiled entranceway flanked by two driveways. The driveways were separated from the tiled area by rows of flowering bushes, yellows and reds that bobbed in the morning breeze. Next to the flowers on the right lay the plastic-covered remains of Jorge Delgado.

I thanked Santiago for letting me look around, and he inquired how I'd hurt my eye.

"I thought the dark glasses covered it."

"Well, most of it," Santiago laughed.

"I had an accident," I said.

"Slipped in the bathtub, no doubt," Santiago said. "That'll take two weeks to go away."

The idea seemed to tickle him. He'd worked so long with Romero that he was beginning to share the older man's per-

verse sense of humor. I took the elevator down and rejoined Lourdes near her father's body. With some effort, I managed to get her away from there to a nearby hotel restaurant, where I ordered coffee for both of us. When I left an hour or so later, her crying had subsided, but I still wondered how she was going to get through the rest of the day.

That afternoon I called Homicide and talked to Detective Santiago. I asked him if they'd turned up anything interesting. He didn't seem to mind the question and said they'd found nothing inconsistent with a suicidal leap from the balcony. Of course they hadn't done the autopsy yet, but he didn't expect anything to come of that. The man's recent history made suicide almost the *most* logical thing for him to do. I thanked him for the update and rang off. Then I picked up the phone and called him again.

"Did you check out Delgado's story about spending four days at a hotel on the south shore?" I asked him.

"No," he admitted.

"What about the taxi ride?"

"Not yet," he said. He sounded downright annoyed with me.

"I don't think I'd leave those loose ends," I said helpfully.

He grunted something like agreement and asked if I had any other suggestions. I said no and wished him a good afternoon.

About twenty minutes later, Lourdes Delgado called. "I just thought of something very strange," she said. "When I offered my father a cigarette, he refused it."

I thought that her grief must be unhinging her a little.

"I don't see your point," I said carefully.

"Father was a fairly heavy smoker. He was under great stress when I talked to him, but he refused a cigarette. In fact, I don't remember his smoking at all during the more than two hours we were together."

"That needn't mean anything. Maybe he was just too stressed to smoke—maybe he was out of cigarettes."

"But *I* was smoking, you see."

"Yes, I see. But I think you might be making too much of a small thing, Srta. Delgado. People sometimes behave very strangely when they're under great stress."

She acknowledged that perhaps I was right and rang off. I leaned back in my creaky office chair and mused about her phone call. Then I turned off what passed for an air conditioner and walked to the car.

El Cisne had quieted down by the time I returned. The body, the police, the ambulance, and the sightseers were all gone. I buzzed Administration on the intercom. There was no reply. I buzzed number 1001, Mrs. Schlitz's apartment. She came on immediately.

"It's Carlos Bannon, Mrs. Schlitz. The private investigator who talked to you yesterday."

"Yes," she said. "Come up, come up."

She gave me a door buzz that would have allowed an arthritic tortoise to crawl through.

I called down the elevator and waited for her to lift me to the heights. She was waiting for me outside her apartment door.

"Oh, isn't it *horrible*," she said. "I would never have expected it in a million years."

"I take it that Sr. Delgado didn't seem to you the type of man to commit suicide."

"No," she breathed. "But I suppose one never can tell."

"No, one can't. Tell me, did you see Sr. Delgado after his return?"

She shook her head. "I was at a furniture auction until six yesterday; afterwards my husband and I met for dinner. We didn't return home until about nine." She lowered her voice

conspiratorially: "Why do you suppose he did it?"

"I don't know," I said without bothering to lower my voice. "Do you think Sr. Ferrer, the psychotherapist, is at home now?"

"Oh yes, he is," she said. "I heard his radio just a few minutes ago."

She said she'd introduce me and rang his bell. The door was opened by a short, plumpish man in his sixties with unruly mad-composer hair and a cherubic smile. He wore baggy, pleated slacks and a silk shirt that probably cost more than my best suit. The shirt was complemented by a bright paisley tie.

"Sí?" he said inquiringly.

Mrs. Schlitz made the explanations, and he invited me into his abode. She reluctantly retreated to her own apartment. I was shown down a hall into a home office that made my own office look like a Turkish cell. Ferrer glanced at his watch and mentioned that he had a patient coming at three o'clock. I said I wouldn't be that long.

I took the deep leather chair he indicated, and he sat on the edge of his mahogany desk. Behind it, I saw a nice dove-grey sports jacket draped over the back of his padded swivel chair.

It was rugs, soft furniture, drapes, rows of books, nature

paintings on the walls. Beiges and shades of orangish browns. The place made you feel secure, at home, except that everything was obsessively neat, even to the positioning of the pens on the desk. The drapes were closed, but I guessed we were facing the Caribe Hilton.

"*Conoció usted a Sr. Delgado bien?*" I began. Did you know Sr. Delgado well?

"*No. Solamente como un vecino.*" No. Only as a neighbor. He looked me over curiously. "Did you say that his daughter hired you?"

"Yes. She is at a loss to explain her father's recent behavior. You can imagine how she feels after his suicide."

"*Sí, puedo imaginar.*" Ferrer himself looked about as perturbable as the Cheshire cat. "Delgado did seem different after he returned."

"You saw him yesterday?"

"I was in the hall waiting for the elevator when he came up. I knew he had been missing because the police had come to question me. Naturally I was curious. I asked him where he had been. At first he ignored me as if I weren't there. When I persisted, he seemed confused, befuddled. He said he'd been 'thinking.'"

"This was not his usual manner."

"Not at all. He was an intelligent, quick-witted man. I'd think he had to be, in his position. But yesterday he seemed distant, abstracted."

"Mightn't a man about to commit suicide be just that way?"

"Yes, of course. The real question is what put him in such a state."

"Did he say anything else to you?"

"Well, I told him the police had been looking for him. He said he knew, but again he said it in a strange way. I asked if he was in some sort of difficulty. He just looked at me, then he unlocked his door and walked in without another word. That was the last time I saw him alive."

Not very helpful. I took my leave of Sr. Ferrer, who escorted me to the hall while glancing again at his watch. Instead of pushing the elevator button, I pushed Sra. Bunuel's doorbell. There was no response. I felt sure that Mrs. Schlitz was watching me through her door's peephole. I went down to the lobby and ran into Sr. Pabón, the building administrator.

"*Una cosa horrible,*" he said. A terrible business. "I've been a condominium administrator for twenty-two years, and I've never seen anything like it."

He looked genuinely grieved. "For a man to reach the point where he chooses to kill himself . . ." His dark eyes clouded with sympathy.

"Who found Sr. Delgado's body?" I asked.

"A *condómine* who was walking her dog. It was just at sunup." He paused. "Why are you here again?"

"Just tying up some loose ends. I don't like to leave a case without closure."

We exchanged goodbyes, and I headed for my car. It wasn't quite three o'clock, and if I hurried, I could get out to Hol-loway, Inc., before the rush hour garroted the city's arteries.

The same guard was at the gate, so I had an easier time getting in. But they still had me chaperoned to the office building. Mr. Stegner wasn't around, but Sr. Cordero was. The solid Srta. Mármol conducted me to his office.

Cordero rose hospitably as I entered, his face a strange amalgam of greeting and sadness, like someone at a wake. He was wearing a beautifully tailored light brown suit and an aquamarine tie. With his carefully combed hair, his trimmed mustache, and the gold on his fingers, he looked like an aging ladies' man. But

he couldn't be very shallow to have reached the position he held.

"A great deal has happened since I saw you only twenty-four hours ago," I said.

"An incredible tragedy," he said. He offered me a cigarette. I declined. I'd quit six months ago, and I was just reaching the point where I could watch someone else smoking without clawing at my eyes. I watched Luis Cordero smoke.

"And apparently it's all true," he continued. "I'm assuming that Jorge's daughter has told you everything."

"Yes. You've been checking the company's books?"

"Two CPA's have been at it since seven this morning. There's still very much to look into. This is just the tip of the iceberg. But there *is* a tip."

"Do you suppose Sr. Delgado could have covered up the discrepancies, given enough time?"

"I doubt it. There are millions involved. It appears he was speculating in real estate in the Bahamas. At least some of the money went that way. In any case, Jorge was right about the federal audit. We received an official notification of it by mail this morning."

"So, under the circumstances, there was no way out for him," I said.

"There's always some way preferable to suicide," Luis Cordero said.

"His daughter feels he wasn't able to face the scandal."

"She's probably right," Cordero agreed sympathetically.

Beautiful blue smoke snaked skyward from his cigarette.

"Tell me, Sr. Cordero—you knew Sr. Delgado well—would you have expected this behavior of him?"

"No, but who can predict what a person will do, given enough temptation? Millions of dollars is enough temptation for anyone."

"I suppose so."

"This scandal is going to hurt the corporation's standing," Cordero said. "Severely. In an ironic way, it's almost a blessing that Jorge killed himself."

"Will you be able to recover the money?"

"Some of it. How much is yet to be seen. By the way, I don't mean to sound impolite, but why are you here?"

"I don't like to leave a case with loose ends; I wanted to learn as much as possible about the situation surrounding Sr. Delgado's suicide."

"Well, by now, I imagine you know as much as we do," he said.

"I appreciate your giving me this additional time," I said, getting up.

He shook hands thoughtfully and called for someone to usher me out. It was the same muscular young man who'd previously performed that service.

I drove back to San Juan under light rain and an arching rainbow. There would be no pot of gold for Lourdes Delgado.

At my office, I telephoned Lieutenant Santiago again. He was out on a case, but was expected back soon. I left my name and phone number.

After an hour of make-work, the phone rang; it was Santiago.

"I was wondering what happened with your check on Delgado's hotel and taxi ride," I said.

"So far, a big fat zero," Santiago said. "None of the taxi companies has a record of a ride to the south shore on Sunday night or Monday morning. Of course, there are the many fly-by-night cabs. We haven't found a record of his stay at a hotel either, but that doesn't mean anything: he could have gone to one of the two-hour 'executive' places or just registered under a different name."

"Will you keep looking?"

"Oh yes," Santiago said sourly.

"Will you let me know if you turn up something?"

"Sure," he said. I couldn't tell if he meant it or not.

After I cradled the receiver, I spent a long time thinking. I find that if you force yourself to do nothing but think about a case, sometimes the pieces start to float together whether they want to or not. And that's what eventually began to happen. It was, to borrow Luis Cordero's metaphor, like an iceberg reconstructing itself. A piece floating from Jorge Delgado's condominium, another from Holloway Electronics, others from various phone calls made or received. All of the iceberg wasn't there yet, but I had hopes.

The clock on my office wall was pushing seven when I made another call to a friend of mine named Roger Caldwell who worked for the IRS in the Federal Building in Hato Rey. After that, I felt hungry. I locked up the office and walked down to the Berliner for wiener schnitzel and a Beck's. I had time to kill, so I lingered over another Beck's. Then I decided to call Lourdes Delgado's apartment to see how she was coping with all the evils that had been piling up on her lately. She didn't sound too bad, all things considered. I returned to my table, ordered a third Beck's, and remembered a modern version of the Job story that Captain Moisés Romero had once told me. It concerned a decent,

hardworking, churchgoing type who seemed to be marked for misfortune. In spite of all his goodness, everything he did, everything he touched turned to ashes. Finally one night in an overflowing of exasperation, he questioned God about his life, asked why he, who tried to do the right thing, should experience nothing but disaster. God heard his prayer, ruminated a bit, and decided to answer him. The divine voice rumbled: "I don't know—you just tick me off."

Moisés Romero liked the philosophy of that little story.

At eight thirty I strolled back to my office for my car. The Condado was full of tourists anxious to lose their money in the casinos. I drove west on Ashford and over the bridge into Punta de Tierra. A high road skirted the ocean between the old officers' beachclub and the walls of Old San Juan. Towards the Old San Juan end was a scenic overlook of the ocean with a place to park off the main road. I pulled in. Farther down I could see the Commonwealth Capitol Building and the silhouettes of the Three Magi riding their camels against the night sky over Fort San Cristobal. I guess you could almost call it a romantic spot. I wasn't there for romance.

Three cars were parked in there, a few people milling around. It was what the travel brochures call a "balmy" night—a good night for milling. I spotted Roger Caldwell leaning against his '85 Volvo towards the end of the lot.

"You got here early," I said as I walked up and shook his hand.

He grinned. "The kids were having a fight over who puts what on the Christmas tree. I was glad to have an excuse to get out."

We rested our forearms on the stone wall and looked out to long lines of moon-glistening white racing for the shore. It was an area the local surfers often used.

"You told me on the phone you have some FBI contacts," I said.

"Yes, of course. If we can give them a legal reason . . ."

"I don't think that will be a problem. We're dealing with federal contracts. The important thing is speed."

"I can start making the arrangements tonight if you'll give me the details."

"Fine," I said.

"Fine," echoed a voice right next to my ear. I jumped. At the same instant I felt the hard nudge against my kidney.

There was another guy nudging Roger. Both of them had

their right hands in their jacket pockets.

"That's right, it's a gun," said the one behind me. I recognized his voice; he was the young man who made a career of showing me off the Holloway premises.

I didn't recognize his companion, another young, hard looking type. A second jolt to the kidney started me walking toward a white van parked close behind us. I was pushed into the front seat and patted down expertly for weapons. I wasn't carrying any.

Roger was in the seat behind me and no doubt undergoing the same routine. He amazed me by not saying anything.

The guy next to me turned over the engine and started up the incline to the main road. He angled left toward Fernandez Juncos. The guy sitting beside Roger was as quiet as Roger was.

I felt guilty about Roger. I also felt guilty about not having noticed that I was being tailed. But those white vans are all over the island, most of them commercial vehicles. This one, I noticed, was loaded with special electronic equipment.

"How long have you been following me?" I asked the muscular driver.

"Since the first time you came out to Holloway. I admit we lost you a couple of times."

"It's better to risk a long tail than to get blown," I agreed.

He smiled. He enjoyed the professional talk.

"Where are you taking us?"

"To a cosy cottage by the sea."

"Sounds like poetry."

He smiled again. If there was something analogous to crocodile tears in a smile, this guy had it. Roger was still quiet—was it because he was terrified? That would be quite understandable.

We drove onto Baldorioty, past Isla Verde, past the airport, out onto the highway to Luquillo. But just beyond Carolina, the driver turned left towards the ocean and Loiza Aldea. He and his pal chatted in Spanish about some girls they mutually knew. They didn't talk like gentlemen.

We'd driven more than half an hour before we pulled to a stop next to a wooden house in a field well off the road. It was surrounded by palm trees and sandy soil, and although I couldn't see the sea over a low rise, I could hear the rhythmic rush of the waves against the shore.

"All out," said the man next to Roger.

We were prodded up onto the porch, through the door, down a short hall, and into a lighted living room done in Puerto Ri-

can Victorian. Seated on an overstuffed patterned chair was none other than Matthew Stegner.

"Mr. Bannon, I presume," he said facetiously.

Perhaps seeing another gringo gave him confidence because my friend Roger suddenly found his voice and said, "What the hell do you think you're—" before the tough next to him slapped him hard on the side of the face. The blow brought tears to Roger's eyes. I felt more guilty.

"You're clever, Mr. Bannon," Stegner resumed. "I know how clever because we've had your office phone tapped since yesterday."

"After all, you're in electronics," I remarked wittily.

"Yes. By the way, you'd be surprised at how easy it is to get into your office."

"I'll put in better security."

"It may be a little late for that," Matthew Stegner said dryly. "You're a loose cannon, Bannon. You and your unfortunate friend here. We can't afford to have you two rolling around upsetting things. And from what I heard in your phone conversation tonight, you know a great deal that could be upset."

"Let me run through it quickly," I said. "Just to see if I've got it right."

"You have quite an ego," Stegner said.

"Let's be charitable and say it's my curiosity. Maybe you'll even be kind enough to fill in the missing pieces. As I reconstruct it, millions of dollars were misappropriated all right, but not by Jorge Delgado. He didn't even know about it. It was you and Cordero who were involved. You figured that you could cover your tracks, given enough time and a little luck, but then you learned of the imminent federal investigation of your books. Apparently you'd slipped up somewhere. Somebody had to take the fall, and who more logical than Jorge Delgado? How am I doing so far?"

"Close enough," Stegner acknowledged.

"Here I run into my first problem," I said. "You kidnap Delgado, you hide him someplace for four days, probably here—it's certainly private enough. You get him to confess to a crime he didn't commit. How did you do that?"

"Before joining Holloway I worked for the government for twelve years," Stegner said. "In intelligence. My specialization was what was termed 'breaking down psychological defenses' through the use of drugs."

"I remember something along those lines in the news-

papers," I said. "Back in the seventies."

"It's even more effective if combined with other methods," Stegner said, "for example, reiteration to the point that it becomes a kind of hypnotic suggestion. In Jorge's case, the reinforcement was the fact that if he did not do what he was told, his daughter would be killed. We also used sleep deprivation."

He sounded quite proud of himself.

"People did notice how different Sr. Delgado was after he reappeared," I said. "He'd even stopped smoking."

Stegner smiled. "I did that by way of a preliminary test of his suggestibility."

"But all this might have come out if Jorge Delgado had remained alive. Did you kill him or did you 'program' him into killing himself?"

"Papo there is quite an athlete," Stegner said, indicating the van driver, who still held a gun on me. "He and Roberto drove the van into the service driveway of Jorge's condominium. Someone standing on top of the van could easily reach the first floor balcony. Papo had no trouble climbing up to the tenth floor from one balcony to the next. He did it in less than three minutes. At four o'clock

in the morning, there was no one awake to take notice."

"And Sr. Delgado was thrown off his balcony. Everything neat and tight."

"Except for you and your friend," Stegner glanced at Roger, who winced. "The federal audit is not for ten days. We need that time to make our company records clearly reflect Jorge's guilt. We also need that time to 'lose' most of the money we appropriated. Your plan to have the FBI investigate our books immediately would certainly have fouled things up. I'm afraid you two must also disappear."

"Why did you do it?" I asked him. "You're well off."

"Not as well off as you'd suppose," Stegner said. "I've made some financial mistakes."

"It was stupid."

He shrugged his shoulders, then got up from his chair, buttoned the top button of his jacket, and instructed his two goons to take us out to some deserted spot and "lose" us. He sounded suddenly impatient.

At his last words, Roger started trembling uncontrollably. I had to help him as they prodded us back out to the white van. They sat us in it as before. Papo, the balcony climber, U-turned us out to the sandy road.

As we swung onto the road, I saw three pairs of headlights coming towards us in tandem. They were coming very fast and seemed to speed up as our whiteness fell within their range. Papo looked momentarily confused, then floored the van's accelerator and we careened jerkily over the potted road. They caught up with us fast enough, one car swinging ahead, one alongside, and one remaining behind. By then their sirens and lights were making whoopee. I thought at first that Papo was going to try to run his way out, but I guess he realized it was hopeless. Instead he hit the brakes, and we coasted to a stop, surrounded. Having decided that discretion was the better part of valor, the two gunmen climbed out quietly with their hands in the air.

Twenty minutes later, Lourdes and I were in the back of one of the police cars on our way to the nearby *cuartel*.

"God, that was a close thing," she said. "If I hadn't been a little late for the meeting with Mr. Caldwell, thanks to a traffic jam outside Plaza las Ameri-

cas mall, I would have been captured with you. As it was, I saw them force you into the van and followed you out to the house. Then I took a chance that you'd remain alive long enough for me to bring the police."

"I saw you pull into the scenic overlook," I said. "Thank God for *Navidades* traffic jams."

Outside the car window, rows of dark palms filed by us like gibbets.

"Did you have any trouble convincing the police to come?" I asked.

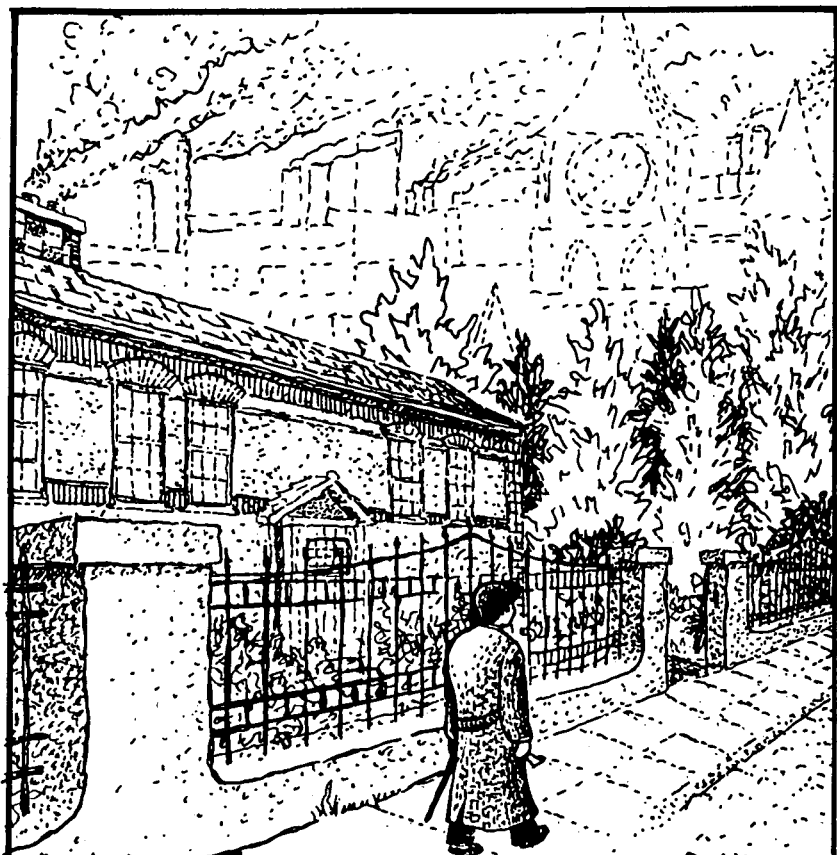
"In a place like this, they're just longing for a melodrama like yours," Lourdes said.

It seemed that for the moment she'd managed to forget about her father's tragedy. But that wouldn't be for long. I would have to tell her what I'd learned from Stegner. I would have to break her heart a little more.

Or would it break her heart? It was hard to say which version of Jorge Delgado's final days was worse.

Right then, I thought I could kill for a cigarette.

MYSTERY CLASSIC



The Passing of "Third Floor Back"

Jerome K. Jerome

The neighborhood of Bloomsbury Square toward four o'clock of a November afternoon is not so crowded as to secure to the stranger, of appearance anything out of the common, immunity from observation. Tibb's boy, screaming at the top of his voice that she was his honey, stopped suddenly, stepped backward onto the toes of a voluble young lady wheeling a perambulator, remained deaf, apparently, to the somewhat personal remarks of the voluble young lady. Not until he had reached the next corner—and then more as a soliloquy than as information to the street—did Tibb's boy recover sufficient interest in his own affairs to remark that he was her bee. The voluble young lady herself, following some half a dozen yards behind, forgot her wrongs in contemplation of the stranger's back. There was this that was peculiar about the stranger's back: that instead of being flat it presented a decided curve. "It ain't a 'ump, and it don't look like kervitcher of the spine," observed the voluble young lady to herself. "Blimy if I don't believe 'e's taking 'ome 'is washing up 'is back."

The constable at the corner, trying to seem busy doing nothing, noticed the stranger's approach with gathering interest. That's an odd sort of a walk of yours, young man, thought the constable; you take care you don't fall down and tumble over yourself.

"Thought he was a young man," murmured the constable, the stranger having passed him. "He had a young face, right enough."

The daylight was fading. The stranger, finding it impossible to read the name of the street upon the corner house, turned back.

Why, 'tis a young man, the constable told himself; a mere boy.

"I beg your pardon," said the stranger, "but would you mind telling me my way to Bloomsbury Square."

"This is Bloomsbury Square," explained the constable; "leastways, round the corner is. What number might you be wanting?"

The stranger took from the ticket pocket of his tightly buttoned overcoat a piece of paper, unfolded it, and read it out: "Mrs. Penny-cherry. Number 48."

"Round to the left," instructed the constable; "fourth house. Been recommended there?"

"By—by a friend," replied the stranger. "Thank you very much."

Aha, muttered the constable to himself; guess you won't be calling him that by the end of the week, young man.

Funny, added the constable, gazing after the retreating figure of the stranger. Seen plenty of the other sex as looked young behind

and old in front. This cove looks young in front and old behind. Guess he'll look old all around if he stops long at Mother Penny-cherry's: stingy old cat.

Constables whose beat included Bloomsbury Square had their reasons for not liking Mrs. Pennycherry. Indeed, it might have been difficult to discover any human being with reasons for liking that sharp-featured lady. Maybe the keeping of second-rate boardinghouses in the neighborhood of Bloomsbury does not tend to develop the virtues of generosity and amiability.

Meanwhile the stranger, proceeding upon his way, had rung the bell of Number 48. Mrs. Pennycherry, peeping from the area and catching a glimpse, above the railings, of a handsome, if somewhat effeminate, masculine face, hastened to readjust her widow's cap before the looking glass while directing Mary Jane to show the stranger, should he prove a problematical boarder, into the dining room, and to light the gas.

"And don't start gossiping, and don't you take it upon yourself to answer questions. Say I'll be up in a minute," were Mrs. Penny-cherry's further instructions; "and mind you hide your hands as much as you can.

"What are you grinning at?" demanded Mrs. Pennycherry a couple of minutes later of the dingy Mary Jane.

"Wasn't grinning," explained the meek Mary Jane; "was only smiling to myself."

"What at?"

"Dunno," admitted Mary Jane. But still she went on smiling.

"What's he like, then?" demanded Mrs. Pennycherry.

"'E ain't the usual sort," was Mary Jane's opinion.

"Praise be for that!" ejaculated Mrs. Pennycherry piously.

"Says 'e's been recommended by a friend."

"By whom?"

"By a friend. 'E didn't say no more."

Mrs. Pennycherry pondered. "He's not the funny sort, is he?"

Not that sort at all. Mary Jane was sure of it.

Mrs. Pennycherry ascended the stairs still pondering. As she entered the room, the stranger rose and bowed. Nothing could have been simpler than the stranger's bow, yet there came with it to Mrs. Pennycherry a rush of old sensations long forgotten. For one brief moment Mrs. Pennycherry saw herself an amicable, well-bred lady, widow of a solicitor; a visitor had called to see her. It was but a momentary fancy. The next instant reality reasserted

itself. Mrs. Pennycherry, a lodging-house keeper, existing precariously upon a daily round of petty meannesses, was prepared for contest with a possible new boarder, who, fortunately, looked an inexperienced young gentleman.

"Someone has recommended me to you?" began Mrs. Pennycherry. "May I ask who?"

But the stranger waved the question aside as immaterial.

"You might not remember him," he smiled. "He thought that I should do well to pass here the few months I am given to be in London. You can take me in?"

Mrs. Pennycherry thought that she should be able to take the stranger in.

"A room to sleep in," explained the stranger; "any room with food and drink sufficient for a man is all that I require."

"For breakfast," began Mrs. Pennycherry, "I give—"

"What is right and proper, I am convinced," interrupted the stranger. "Pray, do not trouble to go into detail, Mrs. Pennycherry. With whatever it is I shall be content."

Mrs. Pennycherry, puzzled, shot a quick glance at the stranger, but his face, though the gentle eyes were smiling, was frank and serious.

"At all events, you will see the room," suggested Mrs. Pennycherry, "before we discuss terms."

"Certainly," agreed the stranger. "I am a little tired and shall be glad to rest there."

Mrs. Pennycherry led the way upward; on the landing of the third floor paused for a moment undecided, then opened the door of the back bedroom.

"It is very comfortable," commented the stranger.

"For this room," stated Mrs. Pennycherry, "together with full board, consisting of—"

"Of everything needful. It goes without saying," again interrupted the stranger, with his quiet, grave smile.

"I have generally asked," continued Mrs. Pennycherry, "four pounds a week. To you—" Mrs. Pennycherry's voice, unknown to her, took to itself the note of aggressive generosity—"seeing you have been recommended here, say three pound ten."

"Dear lady," said the stranger, "that is kind of you. As you have divined, I am not a rich man. If it be not imposing upon you, I accept your reduction with gratitude."

Again Mrs. Pennycherry, familiar with the satirical method, shot a suspicious glance upon the stranger, but not a line was there upon that smooth, fair face to which a sneer could for a moment have clung. Clearly he was as simple as he looked.

"Gas, of course, extra."

"Of course," agreed the stranger.

"Coal—"

"We shall not quarrel," for the third time the stranger interrupted. "You have been very considerate to me as it is. I feel, Mrs. Pennycherry, I can leave myself entirely in your hands."

The stranger appeared anxious to be alone. Mrs. Pennycherry, having put a match to the stranger's fire, turned to depart. And at this point it was that Mrs. Pennycherry, the holder hitherto of an unbroken record for sanity, behaved in a manner she herself, five minutes earlier in her career, would have deemed impossible—that no living soul who had ever known her would have believed, even had Mrs. Pennycherry gone down on her knees and sworn it to them.

"Did I say three pound ten?" demanded Mrs. Pennycherry of the stranger, her hand upon the door. She spoke crossly. She was feeling cross, with the stranger, with herself—particularly with herself.

"You were kind enough to reduce it to that amount," replied the stranger, "but if upon reflection you find yourself unable—"

"I was making a mistake," said Mrs. Pennycherry; "it should have been two pound ten."

"I cannot—I will not accept such sacrifice," exclaimed the stranger, "the three pound ten I can well afford."

"Two pound ten are my terms," snapped Mrs. Pennycherry. "If you are bent on paying more, you can go elsewhere. You'll find plenty to oblige you."

Her vehemence must have impressed the stranger. "We will not contend further," he smiled. "I was merely afraid that in the goodness of your heart—"

"Oh, it isn't as good as all that," growled Mrs. Pennycherry.

"I am not so sure," returned the stranger. "I am somewhat suspicious of you. But willful woman must, I suppose, have her way."

The stranger held out his hand, and to Mrs. Pennycherry, at that moment, it seemed the most natural thing in the world to take it as if it had been the hand of an old friend, and to end the interview with a pleasant laugh—though laughing was an exercise

not often indulged in by Mrs. Pennycherry. Mary Jane was standing by the window, her hands folded in front of her, when Mrs. Pennycherry reentered the kitchen. By standing close to the window one caught a glimpse of the trees in Bloomsbury Square, and through their bare branches of the sky beyond.

"There's nothing much to do for the next half hour till cook comes back. I'll see to the door if you'd like a run out," suggested Mrs. Pennycherry.

"It would be nice," agreed the girl, so soon as she had recovered power of speech; "it's just the time of day I like."

"Don't be longer than the half hour," added Mrs. Pennycherry.

Forty-eight Bloomsbury Square, assembled after dinner in the drawing room, discussed the stranger with that freedom and frankness characteristic of 48 Bloomsbury Square toward the absent.

"Not what I call a smart young man," was the opinion of Augustus Longcord, who was something in the city.

"Thepeaking for mythelf," commented his partner Isidore, "hav'n'th any uthe for the thmart young man. Too many of him ath it ith."

"Must be pretty smart if he's one too many for you," laughed his partner. There was this to be said for the repartee of 48 Bloomsbury Square: it was simple of construction and easy of comprehension.

"Well, it made me feel good just looking at him," declared Miss Kite, the highly colored. "It was his clothes, I suppose—made me think of Noah and the ark."

"It would be clothes that would make you think—if anything," drawled the languid Miss Devine. She was a tall, handsome girl, engaged at the moment in the futile efforts to recline with elegance and comfort combined upon a horsehair sofa. Miss Kite, by reason of having secured the only easy chair, was unpopular that evening, so that Miss Devine's remark received from the rest of the company more approbation than perhaps it merited.

"Is that intended to be clever, dear, or only rude?" Miss Kite requested to be informed.

"Both," claimed Miss Devine.

"Myself, I must confess," shouted the tall young lady's father, commonly called the colonel, "I found him a fool."

"I noticed you seemed to be getting on very well together," purred his wife, a plump, smiling little lady.

"Possibly we were," retorted the colonel; "Fate has accustomed me to the society of fools."

"Isn't it a pity to start quarreling immediately after dinner, you two," suggested their thoughtful daughter from the sofa. "You'll have nothing left to amuse you for the rest of the evening."

"He didn't strike me as a conversationalist," said the lady who was cousin to a baronet, "but he did pass the vegetables before he helped himself. A little thing like that shows breeding."

"Or that he didn't know you, and thought maybe you'd leave him half a spoonful," laughed Augustus the wit.

"What I can't make out about him," shouted the colonel—The stranger entered the room.

The colonel, securing the evening paper, retired into a corner. The highly colored Kite, reaching down from the mantelpiece a paper fan, held it coyly before her face. Miss Devine sat upright on the horsehair sofa and rearranged her skirts.

"Know anything?" demanded Augustus of the stranger, breaking the somewhat remarkable silence.

The stranger evidently did not understand. It was necessary for Augustus, the witty, to advance further into that odd silence.

"What's going to pull off the Lincoln Handicap? Tell me and I'll go out straight and put my shirt upon it."

"I think you would act unwisely," smiled the stranger; "I am not an authority upon the subject."

"Not! Why, they told me you were Captain Spy, of the *Sporting Life*, in disguise."

It would have been difficult for a joke to fall more flat. Nobody laughed, though why Mr. Augustus Longcord could not understand, and maybe none of his audience could have told him, for at 48 Bloomsbury Square Mr. Augustus Longcord passed as a humorist. The stranger himself appeared unaware that he was being made fun of.

"You have been misinformed," assured him the stranger.

"I beg your pardon," said Mr. Augustus Longcord.

"It is nothing," replied the stranger in his sweet, low voice, and passed on.

"Well, what about this theater," demanded Mr. Longcord of his friend and partner; "do you want to go, or don't you?" Mr. Longcord was feeling irritable.

"Got the ticketh—may ath well," thought Isidore.

"D—n stupid piece, I'm told."

"Motht of them thupid, more or leth. Pity to wathte the ticketh," argued Isidore, and the pair went out.

"Are you staying long in London?" asked Miss Kite, raising her practiced eyes toward the stranger.

"Not long," answered the stranger. "At least, I do not know. It depends."

An unusual quiet had invaded the drawing room of 48 Bloomsbury Square, generally noisy with strident voices about this hour. The colonel remained engrossed in his paper. Mrs. Devine sat with her plump, white hands folded on her lap, whether asleep or not it was impossible to say. The lady who was cousin to a baronet had shifted her chair beneath the gasolier, her eyes bent on her everlasting crochet work. The languid Miss Devine had crossed to the piano, where she sat fingering softly the tuneless keys, her back to the cold, barely furnished room.

"Sit down," commanded saucily Miss Kite, indicating with her fan the vacant seat beside her. "Tell me about yourself. You interest me." Miss Kite adopted a pretty, authoritative air toward all youthful-looking members of the opposite sex. It harmonized with the peach complexion and the golden hair, and fitted her about as well.

"I am glad of that," answered the stranger, taking the chair suggested. "I do so wish to interest you."

"You're a very bold boy," Miss Kite lowered her fan for the purpose of glancing archly over the edge of it, and for the first time encountered the eyes of the stranger looking into hers. And then it was that Miss Kite experienced precisely the same curious sensation that an hour or so ago had troubled Mrs. Pennycherry when the stranger had first bowed to her. It seemed to Miss Kite that she was no longer the Miss Kite that, had she risen and looked into it, the flyblown cheval glass over the marble mantelpiece would, she knew, have presented to her view: but quite another Miss Kite—a cheerful, bright-eyed lady, verging on middle age, yet still goodlooking in spite of her faded complexion and somewhat thin brown locks. Miss Kite felt a pang of jealousy shoot through her; this middle-aged Miss Kite seemed, on the whole, a more attractive lady. There was a wholesomeness, a broad-mindedness about her that instinctively drew one toward her. Not hampered, as Miss Kite herself was, by the necessity of appearing to be somewhere between eighteen and twenty-two, this other Miss Kite could talk sensibly, even brilliantly—one felt it. A thoroughly "nice" woman this other Miss Kite; the real Miss Kite, though envious, was bound to admit it. Miss Kite wished to goodness she

had never seen the woman. The glimpse of her had rendered Miss Kite dissatisfied with herself.

"I am not a boy," explained the stranger, "and I had no intention of being bold."

"I know," replied Miss Kite. "It was a silly remark. Whatever induced me to make it I can't think. Getting foolish in my old age, I suppose."

The stranger laughed. "Surely you are not old."

"I'm thirty-one," snapped out Miss Kite. "You don't call it young?"

"I think it a beautiful age," insisted the stranger, "young enough not to have lost the strength of youth, old enough to have learned sympathy."

"Oh, I daresay," returned Miss Kite, "any age you'd think beautiful. I'm going to bed." Miss Kite rose. The paper fan had, somehow, got itself broken. She threw the fragments into the fire.

"It is early yet," pleaded the stranger. "I was looking forward to a talk with you."

"Well, you'll be able to look forward to it," retorted Miss Kite. "Goodnight."

The truth was, Miss Kite was impatient to have a look at herself in the glass, in her own room, with the door shut. The vision of that other Miss Kite—the clean-looking lady of the pale face and the brown hair—had been so vivid Miss Kite wondered whether temporary forgetfulness might not have fallen upon her while dressing for dinner that evening.

The stranger, left to his own devices, strolled toward the loo-table, seeking something to read.

"You seem to have frightened away Miss Kite," remarked the lady who was cousin to a baronet.

"It seems so," admitted the stranger.

"My cousin, Sir William Bosster," observed the crocheting lady, "who married old Lord Egham's niece—you never met the Eghams?"

"Hitherto," replied the stranger, "I have not had that pleasure."

"A charming family. Cannot understand—my cousin, Sir William, I mean, cannot understand my remaining here. 'My dear Emily'—he says the same thing every time he sees me—'my dear Emily, how can you exist among the sort of people one meets with in a boardinghouse?' But they amuse me."

"A sense of humor," agreed the stranger, "was always of advantage."

"Our family on my mother's side," continued Sir William's cousin in her placid monotone, "was connected with the Tatton-Joneses, who, when King George the Fourth—" Sir William's cousin, needing another reel of cotton, glanced up, and met the stranger's gaze.

"I'm sure I don't know why I'm telling you all this," she said in an irritable tone. "It can't possibly interest you."

"Everything connected with you interests me," gravely the stranger assured her.

"It is very kind of you to say so," sighed Sir William's cousin, but without conviction. "I am afraid sometimes I bore people."

The polite stranger refrained from contradiction.

"You see," continued the poor lady, "I really am of good family."

"Dear lady," said the stranger, "your gentle face, your gentle voice, your gentle bearing all proclaim it."

She looked without flinching into the stranger's eyes, and gradually a smile banished the reigning dullness of her features.

"How foolish of me." She spoke rather to herself than to the stranger. "Why, of course, people—people whose opinion is worth troubling about—judge of you by what you are, not by what you go about saying you are."

The stranger remained silent.

"I am the widow of a provincial doctor, with an income of just two hundred thirty pounds per annum," she argued. "The sensible thing for me to do is to make the best of it, and to worry myself about those high and mighty relations of mine as little as they have ever worried themselves about me."

The stranger appeared unable to think of anything worth saying.

"I have other connections," remembered Sir William's cousin; "those of my poor husband, to whom, instead of being the 'poor relation,' I could be the fairy god-mamma. They are my people—or would be," added Sir William's cousin tartly, "if I wasn't a vulgar snob."

She flushed the instant she had said the words and, rising, commenced preparations for a hurried departure.

"Now it seems I am driving you away," sighed the stranger.

"Having been called a 'vulgar snob,'" retorted the lady with some heat, "I think it about time I went."

"The words were your own," the stranger reminded her.

"Whatever I may have thought," remarked the indignant dame, "no lady—least of all, in the presence of a total stranger—would have called herself—" The poor dame paused bewildered. "There is something very curious the matter with me this evening that I cannot understand," she explained. "I seem quite unable to avoid insulting myself."

Still surrounded by bewilderment, she wished the stranger good-night, hoping that when next they met she would be more herself. The stranger, hoping so, opened the door and closed it again behind her.

"Tell me," laughed Miss Devine, who, by sheer force of talent, was contriving to wring harmony from the reluctant piano. "How did you manage to do it?"

"How did I do what?" inquired the stranger.

"Contrive to get rid so quickly of those two old frumps?"

"How well you play!" observed the stranger. "I knew you had genius for music the moment I saw you."

"How could you tell?"

"It is written so clearly in your face."

The girl laughed, well pleased. "You seem to have lost no time in studying my face."

"It is a beautiful and interesting face," observed the stranger.

She swung round sharply on the stool and their eyes met.

"You can read faces?"

"Yes."

"Tell me, what else do you read in mine?"

"Frankness, courage, tenderness."

"Ah, yes, all the virtues. Perhaps. We will take them for granted." It was odd how serious the girl had suddenly become.

"Tell me the reverse side."

"I see no reverse side," replied the stranger. "I see but a fair girl bursting into noble womanhood."

"And nothing else? You read no trace of greed, of vanity, of sordidness, of—" An angry laugh escaped her lips. "And you are a reader of faces!"

"A reader of faces." The stranger smiled. "Do you know what is written upon yours at this very moment? A love of truth that is almost fierce, scorn of lies, scorn of hypocrisy, the desire for all things pure, contempt of all things that are contemptible—especially of such things as are contemptible in woman. Tell me, do I read aright?"

I wonder, thought the girl, is that why those two others both hurried from the room? Does everyone feel ashamed of the littleness that is in them when looked at by those clear, believing eyes of yours?

The idea occurred to her: "Papa seemed to have a good deal to say to you during dinner. Tell me, what were you talking about?"

"The military-looking gentleman upon my left? We talked about your mother principally."

"I am sorry," returned the girl, wishful now she had not asked the question. "I was hoping he might have chosen another topic for the first evening!"

"He did try one or two," admitted the stranger, "but I have been about the world so little. I was glad when he talked to me about himself. I feel we shall be friends. He spoke so nicely, too, about Mrs. Devine."

"Indeed," commented the girl.

"He told me he had been married for twenty years and had never regretted it but once!"

Her black eyes flashed upon him, but, meeting his, the suspicion died from them. She turned aside to hide her smile.

"So he regretted it once?"

"Only once," explained the stranger; "a passing irritable mood. It was so frank of him to admit it. He told me—I think he has taken a liking to me. Indeed, he hinted as much. He said he did not often get an opportunity of talking to a man like myself. He told me that he and your mother, when they travel together, are always mistaken for a honeymoon couple. Some of the experiences he related to me were really quite amusing." The stranger laughed at recollection of them. "That even here, in this place, they are generally referred to as 'Darby and Joan.'"

"Yes," said the girl, "that is true. Mr. Longcord gave them that name the second evening after our arrival. It was considered clever—but rather obvious, I thought myself."

"Nothing, so it seems to me," said the stranger, "is more beautiful than the love that has weathered the storms of life. The sweet, tender blossom that flowers in the heart of the young—in hearts such as yours—that, too, is beautiful. The love of the young for the young, that is the beginning of life. But the love of the old for the old, that is the beginning of—of things longer."

"You seem to find all things beautiful," the girl grumbled.

"But are not all things beautiful?" demanded the stranger.

The colonel had finished his paper. "You two are engaged in a very absorbing conversation," observed the colonel, approaching them.

"We were discussing Darbies and Joans," explained his daughter. "How beautiful is the love that has weathered the storms of life!"

"Ah!" smiled the colonel, "that is hardly fair. My friend has been repeating to cynical youth the confessions of an amorous husband's affection for his middle-aged and somewhat—" The colonel in playful mood laid his hand upon the stranger's shoulder, an action that necessitated his looking straight into the stranger's eyes. The colonel drew himself up stiffly and turned scarlet.

Somebody was calling the colonel a cad. Not only that, but was explaining quite clearly, so that the colonel could see it for himself, why he was a cad.

"That you and your wife lead a cat-and-dog existence is a disgrace to both of you. At least, you might have the decency to try to hide it from the world, not make a jest of your shame to every passing stranger. You are a cad, sir: a cad!"

Who was daring to say these things? Not the stranger: his lips had not moved. Besides, it was not his voice. Indeed, it sounded much more like the voice of the colonel himself. The colonel looked from the stranger to his daughter, from his daughter back to the stranger. Clearly, they had not heard the voice—a mere hallucination. The colonel breathed again.

Yet the impression remaining was not to be shaken off. Undoubtedly it was bad taste to have joked to the stranger upon such a subject. No gentleman would have done so.

But, then, no gentleman would have permitted such a jest to be possible. No gentleman would be forever wrangling with his wife—certainly never in public. However irritating the woman, a gentleman would have exercised self-control.

Mrs. Devine had risen, was coming slowly across the room. Fear laid hold of the colonel. She was going to address some exasperating remark to him—he could see it in her eye—which would irritate him into savage retort. Even this prize idiot of a stranger would understand why boardinghouse wits had dubbed them Darby and Joan, would grasp the fact that the gallant colonel had thought it amusing, in conversation with a table acquaintance, to hold his own wife up to ridicule.

"My dear," cried the colonel, hurrying to speak first, "does not this room strike you as cold? Let me fetch you a shawl."

It was useless: the colonel felt it. It had been too long the custom of both of them to preface with politeness their deadliest insults to each other. She came on, thinking of a suitable reply: suitable from her point of view, that is. In another moment the truth would be out. A wild, fantastic possibility flashed through the colonel's brain. If to him, why not to her?

"Letitia," cried the colonel—and the tone of his voice surprised her into silence—"I want you to look closely at our friend. Does he not remind you of someone? Look hard."

Mrs. Devine, so urged, looked at the stranger long and hard. "Yes," she murmured, turning to her husband, "he does. Who is it?"

"I cannot fix it," replied the colonel. "I thought that maybe you would remember."

"It will come to me," mused Mrs. Devine. "It is someone—years ago—when I was a girl—in Devonshire. Thank you, if it isn't troubling you, Harry. I left it in the dining room."

It was, as Mr. Augustus Longcord explained to his partner Isidore, the colossal foolishness of the stranger that was the cause of all the trouble. "Give me a man who can take care of himself—or thinks he can," declared Augustus Longcord, "and I am prepared to give a good account of myself. But when a helpless baby refuses even to look at what you call your figures, tells you that your mere word is sufficient for him, and hands you over his checkbook to fill up for yourself—well, it isn't playing the game."

"Auguthuth," was the curt comment of his partner, "you're a fool."

"All right, my boy, you try," suggested Augustus.

"Jutht what I mean to do," asserted his partner.

"Well," demanded Augustus, one evening later, meeting Isidore ascending the stairs after a long talk with the stranger in the dining room with the door shut.

"Oh; don't arth me," retorted Isidore; "thilly ath, thath what he ith."

"What did he say?"

"What did he thay? Talked about the Jewth: what a grand rathe they were—how people mithjudged them: all that thort of rot. Thaid thome of the motht honorable men he had ever met had been Jewth. Thought I wath one of 'em!"

"Well, did you get anything out of him?"

"Get anything out of him! Of courthe not. Couldn't very well thell the whole rathe, ath it were, for a couple of hundred poundth, after that. Didn't theem worth it."

There were many things Bloomsbury Square came gradually to the conclusion were not worth the doing—snatching at the gravy, pouncing out of one's turn upon the vegetables, and helping one's self to more than one's fair share; maneuvering for the easy chair; sitting on the evening paper while pretending not to have seen it—all suchlike tiresome bits of business. For the little one made out of it, really, it was not worth the bother. Grumbling everlastingly at one's food; grumbling everlastingly at most things; abusing Pennycherry behind her back; abusing, for a change, one's fellow boarders; squabbling with one's fellow boarders about nothing in particular; sneering at one's fellow boarders; talking scandal of one's fellow boarders; making senseless jokes about one's fellow boarders; talking big about oneself, nobody believing one—all suchlike vulgarities. Other boardinghouses might indulge in them; 48 Bloomsbury Square had its dignity to consider.

The truth is, 48 Bloomsbury Square was coming to a very good opinion of itself; for the which not Bloomsbury Square so much as the stranger must be blamed. The stranger had arrived at 48 Bloomsbury Square with the preconceived idea—where obtained from Heaven knows—that its seemingly commonplace, mean-minded, coarse-fibered occupants were in reality ladies and gentlemen of the first water; and time and observation had apparently only strengthened this absurd idea. The natural result was, 48 Bloomsbury Square was coming round to the stranger's opinion of itself.

Mrs. Pennycherry the stranger would persist in regarding as a lady born and bred, compelled by circumstances over which she had no control to fill an arduous but honorable position in middle-class society—a sort of foster mother, to whom was due the thanks and gratitude of her promiscuous family; and this view of herself Mrs. Pennycherry now clung to with obstinate conviction. There were disadvantages attaching, but these Mrs. Pennycherry appeared prepared to suffer cheerfully. A lady born and bred cannot charge other ladies and gentlemen for coals and candles they have never burned; a foster mother cannot palm off upon her children New Zealand mutton for Southdown. A mere lodging-house keeper can play these tricks and pocket their profits. But a lady feels she

cannot: Mrs. Pennycherry felt she could not.

To the stranger Miss Kite was a witty and delightful conversationalist of most attractive personality. Miss Kite had one failing: it was lack of vanity. She was unaware of her own delicate and refined beauty. If Miss Kite could only see herself with his, the stranger's, eyes, the modesty that rendered her distrustful of her natural charms would fall from her. The stranger was so sure of it Miss Kite determined to put it to the test. One evening, an hour before dinner, there entered the drawing room, when the stranger only was there, and before the gas was lighted, a pleasant, good-looking lady, somewhat pale, with neatly arranged brown hair, who demanded of the stranger if he knew her. All her body was trembling, and her voice seemed inclined to run away from her and become a sob. But when the stranger, looking straight into her eyes, told her that from the likeness he thought she must be Miss Kite's younger sister, but much prettier, it became a laugh instead; and that evening, the golden-haired Miss Kite disappeared, never to show her highly colored face again; and what, perhaps, more than all else, might have impressed some former habitué of 48 Bloomsbury Square with awe was that no one in the house made even a passing inquiry concerning her.

Sir William's cousin the stranger thought an acquisition to any boardinghouse. A lady of high-class family, there was nothing outward or visible, perhaps, to tell you that she was of high-class family. She herself, naturally, would not mention the fact; yet somehow you felt it. Unconsciously, she set a high-class tone, diffused an atmosphere of gentle manners. Not that the stranger had said this in so many words: Sir William's cousin gathered that he thought it, and felt herself in agreement with him.

For Mr. Longcord and his partner, as representatives of the best type of businessmen, the stranger had a great respect: with what unfortunate results to themselves had been noted. The curious thing is that the firm appeared content with the price they had paid for the stranger's good opinion—had even, it was rumored, acquired a taste for honest men's respect that in the long run was likely to cost them dear. But we all have our pet extravagances.

The colonel and Mrs. Devine both suffered a good deal at first from the necessity imposed upon them of learning, somewhat late in life, new tricks. In the privacy of their own apartment they condoled with one another.

"Tomfool nonsense," grumbled the colonel, "you and I starting billing and cooing at our age!"

"What I object to," said Mrs. Devine, "is the feeling that somehow I am being made to do it."

"The idea that a man and his wife cannot have their little joke together for fear of what some impertinent jackanapes may think of them; it's ridiculous!" the colonel exploded.

"Even when he isn't there," said Mrs. Devine, "I seem to see him looking at me with those vexing eyes of his. Really, the man quite haunts me."

"I have met him somewhere," mused the colonel; "I'll swear I've met him somewhere. I wish to goodness he would go."

A hundred things a day the colonel wanted to say to Mrs. Devine, a hundred things a day Mrs. Devine would have liked to observe to the colonel. But by the time the opportunity occurred—when nobody else was by to hear—all interest in saying them was gone.

Women will be women, was the sentiment with which the colonel consoled himself. A man must bear with them—must never forget that he is a gentleman.

Oh well, I suppose they're all alike, laughed Mrs. Devine to herself, having arrived at that stage of despair when one seeks refuge in cheerfulness. What's the use of putting oneself out—it does no good, and only upsets one.

There is a certain satisfaction in feeling you are bearing with heroic resignation the irritating follies of others. Colonel and Mrs. Devine came to enjoy the luxury of much self-approbation.

But the person seriously annoyed by the stranger's bigoted belief in the innate goodness of everyone he came across was the languid, handsome Miss Devine. The stranger would have it that Miss Devine was a double-souled, high-minded young woman, something midway between a Flora Macdonald and a Joan of Arc. Miss Devine, on the contrary, knew herself to be a sleek, luxury-loving animal, quite willing to sell herself to the bidder who could offer her the finest clothes, the richest foods, the most sumptuous surroundings. Such a bidder was at hand in the person of a retired bookmaker, a somewhat greasy old gentleman but exceedingly rich and undoubtedly fond.

Miss Devine, having made up her mind that the thing had got to be done, was anxious that it should be done quickly. And here it was that the stranger's ridiculous opinion of her not only irritated but inconvenienced her. Under the very eyes of a per-

son—however foolish—convinced you are possessed of all the highest attributes of your sex it is difficult to behave as though actuated by only the basest motives. A dozen times had Miss Devine determined to end the matter by formal acceptance of her elderly admirer's large and flabby hand; and a dozen times—the vision intervening of the stranger's grave, believing eyes—had Miss Devine refused a decided answer. The stranger would one day depart. Indeed, he had said himself he was but a passing traveler. When he was gone, it would be easier. So she thought at the time.

One afternoon the stranger entered the room where she was standing by the window, looking out upon the bare branches of the trees in Bloomsbury Square. She remembered afterward it was just such another foggy afternoon as the afternoon of the stranger's arrival three months before. No one else was in the room. The stranger closed the door and came toward her with that curious, quick, leaping step of his. His long coat was tightly buttoned, and in his hands he carried his old felt hat, and the massive, knotted stick that was almost a staff.

"I have come to say goodbye," explained the stranger; "I am going."

"I shall not see you again?" asked the girl.

"I cannot say," replied the stranger. "But you will think of me."

"Yes," she answered with a smile, "I can promise that."

"And I shall always remember you," promised the stranger, "and I wish you every joy—the joy of love, the joy of a happy marriage."

The girl winced. "Love and marriage are not always the same thing," she said.

"Not always," agreed the stranger, "but in your case they will be one."

She looked at him.

"Do you think I have not noticed?" smiled the stranger, "a gallant, handsome lad, and clever. You love him and he loves you. I could not have gone away without knowing it was well with you."

Her gaze wandered toward the fading light.

"Ah yes, I love him," she answered petulantly. "Your eyes can see clearly enough when they want to. But one does not live on love in our world. I will tell you the man I am going to marry if you care to know." She would not meet his eyes. She kept her gaze still fixed upon the dingy trees, the mist beyond, and spoke rapidly and vehemently: "The man who can give me all my soul's desire—money and the things that money can buy. You think me a

woman. I'm only a pig. He is moist, and breathes like a porpoise; with cunning in place of a brain, and the rest of him mere stomach. But he is good enough for me."

She hoped this would shock the stranger, and that now, perhaps, he would go. It irritated her to hear him only laugh.

"No," he said, "you will not marry him."

"Who will stop me?" she cried angrily.

"Your better self."

His voice had a strange ring of authority, compelling her to turn and look upon his face. Yes, it was true, the fancy that from the very first had haunted her. She had met him, talked to him—in silent country roads, in crowded city streets: where was it? And always in talking with him her spirit had been lifted up: she had been—what he had always thought her.

"There are those," continued the stranger—and for the first time she saw that he was of a noble presence, that his gentle, childlike eyes could also command—"whose better selves lie slain by their own hand and trouble them no more. But yours, my child, you have let grow too strong; it will ever be your master. You must obey. Flee from it and it will follow you: you cannot escape it. Insult it and it will chastise with burning shame, with stinging self-reproach, from day to day." The sternness faded from the beautiful face, the tenderness crept back. He laid his hand upon the young girl's shoulder. "You will marry your lover," he smiled. "With him you will walk the way of sunlight and of shadow."

And the girl, looking up into the strong, calm face, knew that it would be so—that the power of resisting her better self had passed away from her forever.

"Now," said the stranger, "come to the door with me. Leavetakings are but wasted sadness. Let me pass out quietly. Close the door softly behind me."

She thought that perhaps he would turn his face again, but she saw no more of him than the odd roundness of his back under the tightly buttoned coat before he faded into the gathering fog. Then softly she closed the door.

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



There's no fictional sleuth quite like Carl Wilcox, the laconic itinerant North Dakota sign painter cum private eye created by Harold Adams. Grab the nearest cushion and a cold can of cream soda, lean back, and enjoy Carl's latest case, **A Way with Widows** (Walker, \$19.95). Adams takes armchair travelers to the rural community of Red Fork, North Dakota, in the 1930's. The relentless prairie wind is finally blowing in some hope of Depression relief as FDR sits in the White House fanning the dream. Carl blows into town, too, in his battered old Model T, answering a frantic call from his sister Annabelle. Her neighbor and friend, Stella, is being held by the police. The new widow is accused of following her spouse one night across their lawn and up another pretty neighbor's dark stairway and slaughtering Aaron Feist in a jealous rage. But Carl unearths a list of other possible motives: Feist's special attentions to his neighbor's simple daughter; friction among members of his band; and tension at the store he inherited from his father. And then there's Annabelle's teenage son Hank, who had a crush on Stella. It requires Carl's celebrated "way with widows" to uncover the secrets and catch the killer in a surprising conclusion.

She Walks These Hills is the third entry in Sharyn McCrumb's Appalachian "Ballad" series (Scribners, \$21). The novel opens when a local man escapes from the prison where he's lived for decades. In his mind, though, Old Harm's only been away from home a few days. No one much cares except Martha, Sheriff Spencer Arrowood's receptionist, who sees her chance to prove to her boss that she's the best choice for the deputy job opening, and Hank the Yank, the local radio talk-show host, who is using the news

item to turn Old Harm into a local folk hero, complete with bumper stickers printed up by the station. Nora Bonesteel, wisewoman and town seer, heeds the call of the mountains and prepares herself for trouble, while a pompous citybred history professor begins a hiking trip alone, foolishly determined to retrace the steps taken by a young local woman who was kidnapped by Shawnees in 1789 but escaped to make an incredible solo journey back to her Appalachian home. There's much more to the naming of the "Ballad" series than the source of her novels' titles. McCrumb infuses these tales with the lyric qualities, mythic characters, and haunting undertones of superstition and the supernatural that echo long after you've closed the book.

Ed McBain, author of the popular 87th Precinct novels, brings back his coastal Florida attorney Matthew Hope in **There Was a Little Girl** (Warner, \$21.95). Hope is shot and lies in a hospital teetering between consciousness and coma. We learn that after his last case he's sworn off criminal cases and trial work. The first time he visits the Steadman Circus it's to talk to the owner about a real estate deal. The man's partner, however, is the daughter of a well-known circus performer who inherited her share at her mother's death, which she claims was murder. And in spite of his resolution, Hope just can't prevent himself from digging deeper. The novel recounts the harrowing week after the shooting; McBain reveals the story by switching from flashbacks (Hope's investigation) to the present efforts of three friends (two private eyes and a local cop) who believe that, by retracing Hope's steps the week before, they too can find the trail that leads to a killer. They will then have also found the person who hoped to silence Hope. Through it all, the protagonist lies in a state of helplessness. An offbeat way to tell a story, devised by a recognized pro in the genre.

Richard Rosen won an Edgar for his first Harvey Blissberg mystery. His latest, **World of Hurt** (Walker, \$19.95), is longer, richer, and darker as he explores the family ties that bind. Harvey is a formerly famous ballplayer who now works as a private eye. He's not overjoyed when his older brother Norm, a college teacher in the Chicago suburbs, calls to ask a favor. Can Harvey fly out from Boston and help the local cops, who haven't any leads on the brutal murder of a guy Norm and his buddies regularly played basketball with at the Y? They've taken up a collection to pay Harvey's rates. As Harvey labors to get a bead on a man whom everyone apparently liked, a great salesman to local homebuyers and someone who lived alone and called his mother regularly—and whom no one

apparently knew very well—he is also struggling at home. He and Mickey, the woman he shares his life and house with, are beginning to experience discord over their commitments to the relationship. Rosen's likeable, wisecracking, and sometimes even wise private eye makes an excellent companion in this foray into old family secrets, revenge, love and honor among siblings, and the pain any of us may inflict on those whom we care the most about.

Carolyn G. Hart began a second series last year by introducing a spunky senior sleuth named Henrietta O'Dwyer Collins. The former journalist and current academic known as Henrie O to her friends returns in **Scandal in Fair Haven** (Bantam, \$19.95). Margaret's heart attack leaves Henrie O alone in Margaret's Tennessee cabin where the two friends had planned to spend their spring break. Henrie O's first night's sleep is interrupted by the unexpected arrival of Margaret's young nephew Craig, who also expected to have the cabin to himself. But Craig didn't come for a rest. He's discovered the murdered body of his rich wife at their home in the small town of Fair Haven, and he's fled the scene of the crime. That's how the inexhaustible Henrie O becomes Margaret's stand-in, posing as Craig's aunt as she tries to discover who framed him for his wealthy wife's murder. Although Hart's admiration of Agatha Christie can be seen in the clever plotting, her characters are more vibrant and her use of psychology more sophisticated. The result is a solid sequel to a series that's off and running.

SOLUTION TO THE MID-DECEMBER "UNSOLVED":

The two armed bank robbers were Carl Fallon, the bus driver, and Dan Kiddle, the carpenter. Delia Ingres drove the getaway car.

MAN	WOMAN	PROFESSION	ADDRESS
Andy Jepson	Elena	dentist	334 Maple
Brad Harker	Cathy	architect	281 Cherry
Carl Fallon	Betty	bus driver	342 Walnut
Dan Kiddle		carpenter	281 Maple
Earl Garver	Alice	editor	342 Cherry
	Delia Ingres		334 Walnut

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



If you've ever been called for jury duty, most likely, you haven't had the same experience Joanne Whalley-Kilmer does in **Trial by Jury**, but if you've never been called, after seeing this film, most likely you'll do everything you can to avoid serving.

That's the cockeyed civics lesson you get from Heywood Gould's latest Hollywood effort, which stars Whalley-Kilmer as a single mother and New York businesswoman who finds herself one of twelve men and women sitting in judgment on Rusty Pirone (Armand Assante), a bigtime mob boss who's not only a killer but a killer fashion plate.

Whalley-Kilmer is Valerie, who cheerfully tells cynical friends she's off to jury duty. "It's a duty, you understand. You don't get out. You do it." Never mind that she's a single

mother to her seven-year-old son and runs her own business, a vintage clothing store.

Rusty Pirone is up on federal charges that include running a criminal enterprise and the murders of eleven people. To illustrate that he means business, he has his people kill the prosecution's star witness—a mob turncoat—right under their noses.

While that puts a dent in the case, it doesn't prevent U.S. Attorney Daniel Graham (Gabriel Byrne) from forging ahead with his case against Pirone. The two share a common thread, both having grown up in the same rough-and-tumble Brooklyn neighborhood. Pirone mocks Graham in their initial courtroom encounter, telling him, "I forgot, another Brooklyn boy who made good."

To make sure he isn't convicted, Pirone and his defense

team target the jury, zeroing in on the lovely and vulnerable Valerie.

Enter William Hurt as the wonderfully greasy lowlife Tommy Vesey, an ex-cop who now works for Pirone. He snatches Valerie in broad daylight in Central Park and warns her, "I've got a message from Rusty Pirone. He's innocent."

He implores her to vote that way to prevent harm from coming to her son and to her. "You can't hide, baby," he warns.

He gives her his "word of honor" that she and her son will be safe if she cooperates. Of course, the promise of a one-time crooked cop and mob henchman shouldn't be worth much.

At this point the movie goes off on the wrong track.

To keep her in line, Vesey pays Valerie a couple of visits and keeps in touch by phone. That's believable.

But when Pirone himself shows up at Valerie's apartment to chat one night, and winds up forcing himself on her, things have gone too far.

It's difficult to imagine that anyone who has as many felonies stacked against him as Pirone would be out on bail during his trial.

And after having his star witness against Pirone rubbed out on the eve of the trial, you'd think the prosecutor would consider asking that the jurors' names be withheld for their own protection. But no such request is made.

Despite its lack of credibility in places, there are some dramatic moments. The jury's deliberations are tense and action-packed, for instance.

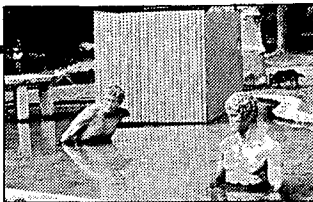
The highlight of *Trial by Jury* is unquestionably Armand Assante, with his slicked-back hair and impeccably tailored suits. He outshines the real-life dapper don, John Gotti, with plenty of charm to spare. In court, he gladhands members of the press—"Hey, spell my name right this time," he jokes with one reporter. And he makes ladies swoon.

Despite Assante's many charms, however, this would-be courtroom thriller is a trial to sit through.

NOTE, ESPECIALLY FOR NEW OR NEWISH READERS OF AHMM: Look for the Mystery of the Month from AHMM online. If you subscribe to CompuServe (Mystery and Suspense, in The Literary Forum), America Online (The Writers' Club), or GENie (Writers' Round Table), you can catch up with some outstanding stories from recent issues of AHMM. Details next issue!—ED.

THE STORY THAT WON

The September Mystery was won by James Wilson. Honorable mentions go to Shayne of Santa Cruz, Marie deMorest of Copen R. Price of Havertammy Brown of Lovington, New Mexico; R. J. Stevens of Calgary, Alberta, Canada; Robert Morrison of Kirkland, Quebec, Canada; Lois E. Anderson of Mountain Home, Arkansas; Katrina Blodgett of Shreveport, Louisiana; and James Sadlemyer of Odessa, Saskatchewan, Canada.



ous Photograph contest son of Saint Helens, Oregon go to Debbie California; Elizabeth tage Grove, Oregon; Ste-town, Pennsylvania;

Maria Woodward

HAIR OF THE DOG by James Wilson

Joe Gronskey developed a real passion for art in prison. Webfoot Gronskey they called him in the joint because he liked to sculpt in the showers. "The water between my toes gets the creative juices flowing," he told Bignose Flannery, and he was serious, too. Bignose is six four but Webfoot looked down when he talked to him, so nobody laughed.

When Webfoot got out, he developed a further passion for privacy, constructing corrugated tin huts around his works in progress right in the pool behind his shack. He'd come up with a process that gave very lifelike qualities to his figures. Things were going great.

Then the girl's dog started hanging around.

Then Detective Donavon showed up with a warrant. "That dog's owner is missing, Webfoot," said Donavon, "and you're an ex-con. The judge says that's probable cause." Now Donavon went right for the tin contraption in the pool, it was so obvious.

But he didn't find the girl. She turned up later, waiting on tables out in L.A., waiting on her big break to get in the movies. What he found was a hot acetylene rig and a load of rebar from a nearby construction project, part of Webfoot's secret process.

Well, Joe Gronskey's back inside, but things are going great. He teaches sculpting now, in the showers, of course. And he goes months at a time without ever catching sight of a dog.

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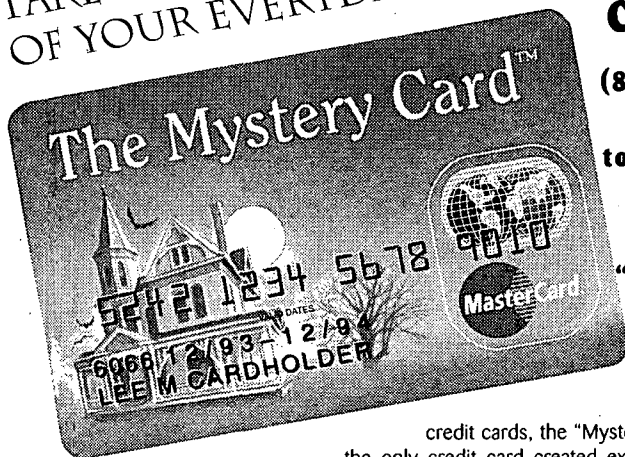
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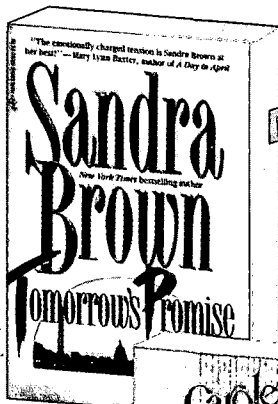
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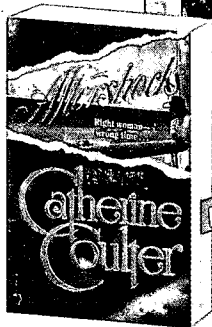
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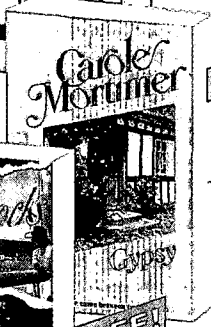
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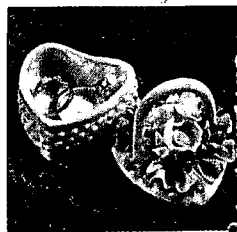
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